



## *HERMITAGE COUNTRY CLUB: A BRIEF HISTORY*

*by Bruce H. Matson*

This article is excerpted from *HERMITAGE COUNTRY CLUB: A History of Its First 100 Years*, a 196-page, full-color book about the history of Hermitage Country Club, which features numerous vintage photographs of the Club from the early years to the present day. Copies of the book are available from the Club's Business office.

In the 1890's Richmond had a number of electric street car or "trolley" companies that made significant investments in laying track and stringing lines to the West and North of the city. One of these companies, the Richmond Traction Company, had installed track and lines down the Richmond Turnpike (now Broad Street) from Church Hill, west to the Boulevard and then south to Reservoir (now Byrd) Park. The owners of the trolley line thought that the development of golf in the West End might help to increase patronage of the company's streetcar line.

Berkeley Williams, a purchasing agent for the Richmond Traction Company, took the initiative to gather a group of Richmond businessmen to consider forming a golf club. After an organizational meeting and some investigation of the feasibility and advisability of the initiative, the Hermitage Golf Club was formed in October 1900. The initial members included Mayo Binford, Clarence Cadot, H. Stewart Jones, George A. Gibson, R. H. "Dick" Meade, William R. Massie, E.L. Bemiss, H.K. Ellyson, Jr., Murray M. McGuire, Levin Joynes, Dr. R.F. Williams, B.B. Valentine, O. Baylor Hill, Peter Winston, "Little Ned" Meyers, Scott Parrish, W.H. "Billy" Parrish, William C. Noland, Thomas M. Rutherford, Berkeley Williams, William Todd, and Spider Williams.

With a willing assemblage of businessmen committed to the unique endeavor of forming a new golf club, it was naturally necessary to turn their attention immediately to constructing a golf course. To layout a golf course, the new club employed William Braid (from Baltimore Country Club), Willie Tucker (from Chevy Chase Country Club) and W.V. Hoare of Dayton, Ohio (who, at that time, was the reigning U.S. long distance drive champion). The result of their work was a simple, 9-hole course of 2,850 yards. The hole distances were: 1st – 321, 2nd – 333, 3rd – 358, 4th – 410, 5th 280, 6th – 323, 7th – 350, 8th – 330, and 9th - 145. Bogey (par) was established at 40. What hazards existed on the course were among the most unique in all of golf. The following is among the Club's favorite descriptions of its original golf course:

The ground was flat – no hills, but some of the most unique and insurmountable hazards any course ever saw: for instance, one tremendous exposition building left over from the State Exposition of 1888 had to be negotiated, also stables, exhibit buildings scattered over the course which had to be left for there was no money to remove them and last but not least there was one hazard which became known as the lake – a perfectly dry concrete basin, same character as swimming pools nowadays, but larger and the concrete was badly cracked and broken. Imagine your ball in the swimming pool at the Country Club of Virginia when it was empty and having to play it out. The player whose ball got into that "lake" was bold if he tried to play it out for he was in danger of either bursting his club or having his ball emerge in an entirely different

direction from that intended. The empty concrete basin once held water representing the

Mediterranean Sea but in 1900 represented only the remains of the great city of Pompeii, which was destroyed nightly during the Exposition of 1888 by Vesuvius.

It may have been simple, but it fit the bill. William Baird agreed to leave Baltimore to become the resident professional at Hermitage.

Just a few years after its formation, the Hermitage Golf Club became one of the founding members of the Virginia State Golf League (“VSGL”). The VSGL would evolve into the Virginia State Golf Association (“VSGA”), which dates its formation to 1904. Shortly thereafter, the Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac Railroad acquired the property leased to Hermitage Golf Club with plans to construct a major station house on that site. A few years later, anticipating the need to relocate the Club, a disagreement developed among the members as to whether the Club should be relocated to a site further west or move to the north of the city. A group favoring “westward expansion” ultimately decided to form a new, separate Club in the county west of the city, which became the Country Club of Virginia.

Hermitage wasted little time establishing itself as a Club of premier golfers. The Club won the 1907, 1908, 1910 and 1911 Club Championship of the Virginia State Golf League (“VSGL”) – the only organized statewide golf tournament in existence at that time. In 1911, the VSGL initiated the Virginia Amateur Championship, which was promptly won by Hermitage member William H. Palmer, Jr. Another Hermitage member, R. H. “Dick” Meade was runner-up. Palmer was runner-up the next year, but claimed the championship again in 1914, when the runner-up was another Hermitage member W. P. Wood. A tradition of excellence in amateur golf had begun, and would continue throughout the Club’s history.

In 1913, the RF&P announced that it would finally begin construction of a new terminal – Broad Street Station - on the site of the then present Hermitage Golf Club. If the Club were to continue on, it would have to make definite plans for the future. Suitable land was located and optioned north of the City near Lakeside Park and close to the Ashland Trolley Line in Henrico County, just off Route 1 on a cross street called Hilliard Road.

Of paramount need, of course, was sufficient funding to pay for the construction of a new golf course, a new Clubhouse and other Club facilities. To raise this much needed capital, the decision was made to form a stock corporation so that shares could be sold to the Club’s members. On July 3, 1916, the Articles of Incorporation for Hermitage Country Club, Inc. were signed by the original incorporators, which consisted of James L. Anderson, O. Baylor Hill, P. Grayson Dashiell, Rives D. Fleming, Lewis H. Blair, Jr., Wins F. Wilson, Frederick S. Valentine, W.S. Rhoads, William H. Palmer, Jr., and W.C. Locker. Judge R. Carter Scott approved the articles on July 6 and on July 8, 1916, the State Corporation Commission of Virginia granted Hermitage a corporate charter.

The new Club agreed to purchase all of the assets of the Hermitage Golf Club, which consisted of \$1,300 in the bank, “two horses, mowers, tools, utensils of all kinds, fertilizers of every description, all furniture and fixtures in the Clubhouse and also all boilers, stoves, kitchen utensils, lockers and . . . all options and equities in all property on or near Hilliard Road in Henrico County near Lakeside.” In its first year the Club secured 295 active, 227 contributing, 26 non-resident, and 7 junior members. Monthly dues in 1916 were set

at \$5.00 a month for resident and \$2.50 for contributing members.

The Club engaged A.W. Tillinghast to design its new golf course. Hermitage's course at Hilliard would be one of his earliest design efforts. Willis Clyde Locker, chairman of Hermitage's Green Committee, supervised the construction of the new course at Hilliard, which efforts were hampered by bad weather and labor problems. In an effort to finish the course in 1917, Locker, who was one of the few early members with an automobile, would collect workers downtown and take them to the course. With Tillinghast's routing and hole designs and Locker's considerable effort and necessary frugality, Hermitage finished its new golf course at a cost of \$3,000 – \$1,000 for Tillinghast, \$1,200 for grass seed and \$800 for labor, an amazingly low sum even for 1917.

Hermitage's leaders had many issues to address in trying to relocate the Club to a new site. In addition to the obvious task of completing a new golf course, the Club was faced with hiring a golf professional, designing a Clubhouse, securing an adequate water supply, constructing tennis courts, developing "Hermitage Park" subdivision, addressing the transportation concerns of its members, not to mention the considerable task of financing such needs and objectives. During WWI the Club faced severe financial hardship. At least once during these formative years at Hilliard Road Hermitage's leaders seriously considered "throwing in the towel." At a meeting of all members in 1923 the question of closing the Club was addressed, but the members voted to "carry on." Like many volunteer organizations, however, Hermitage continued to walk a financial tight rope.

Hermitage's longest serving and most beloved professional, Tommy Galloway, started his responsibilities as golf professional at Hermitage on March 1, 1928. It did not take long for Tommy Galloway to begin to make his mark on Hermitage Country Club. In 1931, Galloway provided the inspiration as well as the "leg work" to organize and host a premier amateur golf tournament. Frederick S. Valentine of the Valentine Meat Juice Company donated a trophy for the event – thus "The Valentine Invitational" was born. The tournament continues to thrive today as one of the premier amateur events in Virginia. He also began to tutor fine young golfers such as Billie Howell, Bobby Riegel, Bill Tomlinson and Davis Ewell, Jr. Continuing Hermitage's tradition as the home of the state's finest amateur players, Howell won a number of State Amateurs and made it to the semi-finals of the U.S. Amateur. Similarly, Riegel would win the Virginia State Amateur and be named to the Walker Cup team.

After the Second World War, Hermitage organized and staged the Richmond Open in November of 1945, which was sanctioned by the P.G.A. of America and featured the country's leading golf professional competing for \$10,000 in prize money. Ben Hogan won the event, which was played again at Hermitage in 1946. After the success of the two Richmond Opens, Hermitage succeeded in its bid to host one of golf's major events – the 1949 PGA Championship. Local favorite Sam Snead won the match play tournament by defeating Johnny Palmer 3 and 2 in the final match.

In the late 1950's, the Club acquired land north of Hilliard Road, near Telegraph Road, to build a second golf course for the Club called "Ethelwood," which was designed and routed by William and David Gordon of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The construction was done and supervised by then Hermitage professional Jim Reynolds. The Ethelwood course opened for play in 1960 and offered a design style distinct from the Tillinghast course at Hilliard Road. Ethelwood featured length (6,775 yards), undulating green contours and runway style teeing ground, all of which contrasted sharply with the relatively short course at Hilliard,

which had small greens with subtle breaks and modest tee boxes.

Shortly after building the Ethelwood course, the Club's leadership almost immediately began wondering further about a new permanent home for Hermitage's future. A parcel of approximately 450 acres was located at "Broad Run" in Goochland County and plans were made for constructing a 54-hole complex. To help finance the Club's plans to move to Goochland, Hermitage sold the golf course and improvements at Hilliard Road to Henrico County in 1977. The County changed the course's name to "Belmont Park". Today, the public can play essentially the same course over which Sam Snead won the 1949 PGA.

The move was not without uncertainty and hardship. As the 1980's started, the solvency of Hermitage Country Club was in doubt. On the other hand, by 1990 Hermitage sported a considerable waiting list. The expansion of Richmond west and a strong economy provided membership growth and financial stability. In 1983 Crestar Bank (then United Virginia Bank) began sponsorship of a Senior PGA Tour tournament, for which Hermitage Country Club served as host as the country's best senior golfers competed over 18 of the Club's 27 holes in Goochland. The tournament brought thousands of Richmonders out to Broad Run, where they could see the Club's golf and other facilities. Inevitably, having Arnold Palmer, Lee Trevino, Chi Chi Rodriguez and other golf legends playing the Pine and Lake nines had some impact on the Club's financial health.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Hermitage members continued to bring attention to the Club for their golfing prowess throughout the 1980's and 1990's. Also in the 1990's an additional or "new" nine, designed by Arthur Hills, as well as a significant Clubhouse expansion opened. Ten years later, the Club brought Hills back to the Club to guide a substantial renovation and redesign of the Lake nine (and the Sabot Course).

Hermitage's trip from Broad Street to Broad Run was often a difficult and uncertain one. During the Club's first 100 years, however, it established itself as not only a home for fine amateur players, but as a modern Country Club featuring 36 holes of exceptional golf, excellent tennis, pool facilities, a fine Clubhouse, and a vibrant membership.