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A SHORT HISTORY OF COUNTY COUNTRY CLUBS

By William M. Offut

At one time there were big signs on Wisconsin Avenue in Montgomery County near the District Line that informed travelers that they were entering a "country club community." The local Chamber of Commerce meant Bethesda, although they had a hard time deciding exactly where the signs should go and some folks in Chevy Chase protested loudly. These days, the whole county might well be so designated for all of our major highways lead to country clubs or to other golf and tennis facilities of one sort or another.

What we now know as "country clubs" began several centuries ago in London associations formed by upper class men for their peers. Like many other things English, these clubs were transported to the Atlantic colonies. The oldest may well have been the South River Club near Annapolis that began about 1700.

By the 1830s the gentlemen's clubs and their wealthy members were recognized influences in American cities such as Boston and New York and had spread to San Francisco and Baltimore before the Civil War. All followed a fairly rigid pattern in which there were written by-laws and rules and an admissions committee with its ballot box and the dreaded black ball. The design of clubhouses generally followed English patterns with sitting and dining rooms as well as sleeping chambers. Some clubs developed arcane rituals, but in general good manners and the social graces were expected and women and the common folk were excluded. White Protestants dominated the vast majority of these

clubs, and since Jews also were routinely excluded, they formed their own social clubs early on, some of which became equally selective and exclusive.

In the Washington, D.C. area the Cosmos Club, the Metropolitan Club and the University Club have the deepest roots. The first capital-area women's club was the Washington Club and the first club for black elites was the Manhattan Club of D.C. In Montgomery County, there was a popular men's club, the Montgomery Club, in Rockville. Its second clubhouse still stands at Williams and Falls Roads. Its first meeting place is now Pumphrey's funeral home.¹

Out in the country there were many early resorts featuring hunting, polo, sport fishing, horse racing, even baseball and cricket. Yachting also attracted the wealthy as did tennis, especially the grass court variety with its well-controlled behavior and dress. Proper fashion was important: one always wore the right sporting clothes such as the riding habit, tennis whites, and coaching dress. Foxhunting was popular in Maryland and Virginia, cricket in Philadelphia, horse racing in the South and winter sports in the North. The still popular Sycamore Island Club on the Potomac River in Montgomery County traces its beginnings to 1885.

The promotion of the rural ideal, and commuter rail made it easier to develop clubs outside of cities. Most suburban clubs had three things in common: city club structure, rural connections, and outdoor sports. The first such clubs may have been in Massachusetts: Myopia in Winchester formed in 1879 and the Country Club in Brookline, in 1882. The latter was closer to town, with activities for families and indoor facilities, but women's role remained limited and they were excluded on Sundays. Of course, only men were members.

More clubs developed in the 1880s and in the economic boom of the 1890s produced over a thousand country clubs, mostly in the East and many along trolley lines. By the beginning of the 20th century every state had at least one country club. The majority of these clubs, including most in Montgomery County, were formed by a small group of rich men who developed a list of potential members from friends and business acquaintances, excluding women, minorities and what they considered the lower classes.

Sports played an important role in the country clubs' popularity. Most had billiards and card rooms, some featured bowling, shuffleboard, even casinos. Many offered archery, croquet, skeet shooting and boating. Horse sports included coaching, fox hunting, racing, steeplechase, and polo. Lawn tennis also was popular, an ideal diversion for upper class women who played wearing bustles and long dresses, doubles usually.

Golf changed the country club world, and by the 1890s some new clubs used golf as the major reason for organizing. By 1900 there were more than a thousand golf courses, with many layouts far from the nine-hole norm. Golf dress code and rules developed along with accepted manners and etiquette. Many members played on Sunday, despite blue laws and public opinion, which frowned on such a practice.

Real estate developers soon recognized the potential of the country club. New York's Tuxedo Park, Roland Park in Baltimore and the Baltimore Country Club all promoted real estate projects and created separate subdivisions, often walled off from other nearby communities. Country clubs boomed in the 1920s when slot machines jangled in some clubs and liquor flowed in many. The clubs became the place for debutante parties, and swimming pools gained in popularity despite the protests of many older members who feared they might attract wives and children. By the mid-1920s golf club was a synonym for country club.

The came the stock market crash! Most clubs were unprepared, and many were overextended. Some had offered life memberships, others had acquired big mortgages while competing for members with grander clubhouses with bigger ballrooms and other expensive facilities. New revenue sources were needed quickly. The clubs began renting out their clubhouses, staging benefit dances and expanding activities to families. Legal alcohol saved some clubs, but many disappeared in the collapse of the Wall Street bubble built on margin and hope.²

The Chevy Chase Club is Montgomery County's oldest and it followed the national trend. Silver lobbyist and Chevy Chase Land Company founder Francis Newlands helped create it out of the Dunblane Club which had been meeting and riding cross country from Tenleytown since 1885 and probably had the first pack of hounds in the area. Many of

the hunts ended at the Loughborough home, Grasslands, where the federal Department of Homeland Security now has its temporary headquarters. The kennelman was Bob Curran, a son of the large Tenleytown family, who later became master of hounds.

Newlands, as first president, let the club use the land between the Chevy Chase Circle and Wisconsin Avenue, then known as Belmont and later called Kirkside. In 1897 the Chevy Chase Club bought the old Bradley farm. The Bradley family's big farmhouse on what became Connecticut Avenue served as the first clubhouse.² Foxhunting ended after Clarence Moore, master of the hunt, went down with his dogs on the Titanic. In 1903 the club bought more land and in 1908 acquired the Dodge property along Wisconsin Avenue, laid out 18-holes on those 188 acres, and hired a pro and club maker. Often the first trolley of the day brought golfers out to the club. Casual attire was not allowed and most men wore red coats with black facings when they played golf. Tennis also was popular; the club had sixteen courts by World War I plus a bowling alley and a baseball team. Henri DeSibour designed the new clubhouse which cost more than \$105,000 and was labeled a fine example of "early penitentiary colonial architecture" by William Howard Taft. Waddy Wood added the wings in the mid-1920s. The old Bradley farmhouse was used for bedroom space until it burned in 1918.³

Columbia Country Club had its 1898 golf club beginnings in Petworth on Georgia Avenue. It moved north as membership grew and then settled in Chevy Chase in 1910 on 126 acres of mostly Hayes Manor land and within easy walking distance of the trolley. The members built a \$50,000 clubhouse designed by Frederick Pyle and a golf course designed by Walter J. Travis. The Club had tennis from the start, and Donald Woodward donated a swimming pool in 1925. Early members, like William Corby, may have joined because "the Club" initially turned down applications from those in business. Fred McLeod was Columbia's pro from 1912 until 1967.⁴

The Bethesda Country Club has an involved past. It began life as the Montgomery Country Club, which was part of the huge Bradley Hills development that ran a trolley line to Great Falls before World War I. The club was incorporated in Washington, D.C. and bought 150 acres, turned the old home on the site into a clubhouse and laid

out an 18-hole course by 1915. The new club's publicity said it planned to be national rather than local in nature and admitted it might be difficult to gain admission saying, "only the ultra fashionable will be permitted to join." It promised polo, golf and tennis and advertised that "particular attention will be paid to hunting." But the development foundered, and in 1924 what was left of the membership bought the John Thompson estate, had Henri deSibour remodel the farmhouse, and moved out into the county. By the 1930's it was down to fewer than 50 members but has now prospered near Laytonsville and is again called the Montgomery Country Club.⁵

Meanwhile the Congressional Women's Country Club organized in 1929 took over the former Bethesda site and changed its name to National Women's Country Club. Members included First Ladies Mrs. Woodrow Wilson and Mrs. Herbert Hoover. (Women were identified by the husbands' names.) The first Club president was Mrs. Tuckerman, whose husband, Walter, an avid sportsman had been active in the club's creation. In 1931 the club restored and completed a two-story addition to the clubhouse. Members who did not golf could knit, play cards or chat. The club was noted for its lane of fifty-five elm trees, planted in 1932 in honor of famous women from Clara Barton to Queen Isabella; for its pro, Jocko Miller; and for its White Russian manager, Captain I. V. Mishtowt.

The National Women's Club failed during the Depression, and by the late 1930s, it was operating as a public course, one of the first to have white sand in its traps. Fred Finlay had modeled its original nine holes on the famous St. Andrews course. In 1940 car dealer Eddie Adams bought the defunct club, and hired Al Jamison who had been at Bannockburn, Kenwood and Indian Spring. Jamison used seven of the existing nine holes to lay out a long 18-hole course and a membership drive began for the hopeful Bradley Hills Country Club.

Then came the war. In 1942 Jamison left and always regretted closing the pro shop and sending back dozens of golf balls that would soon be worth their weight in gold. The new pro said nine fairways would be ready for winter rules but the whole 18 would take another year. The club claimed it had 200 members. In 1945 National Airways purchased Bradley Hills for \$250,000 and said it planned an airpark country club on its 157 acres. The state

commission gave the club a license and the Bethesda Chamber of Commerce supported the idea. John Hoberman led the new owners, and E. Brooke Lee and the Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission (MNCPPC) opposed them. Controversy bubbled for months. The club opened in mid-June, thoroughly refurbished, as the Washington Aviation Country Club. It held a dance every Saturday and a buffet on Sunday, promised a swimming pool by July 4, hosted a Chamber outing and invited the USO to use the facilities. But the Club did not succeed, and in 1947 the property was sold to the Bethesda Country Club. By 1951 the new club had 540 members and was putting on a drive to pay its \$75,000 note.⁶

The Bannockburn Golf Club was different, more middle class than most of the other county country clubs. It was organized about 1900 as the Capital Golf and County Club and first used the Kirkside links on Western Avenue. Later, the Club bought 123 acres on Conduit Road, built a clubhouse and laid out a hilly 18-hole course near both the trolley line to Cabin John and several summer hotels in the Glen Echo area.

In the 1920s boom, faced with heavy competition, the club borrowed money to build a new clubhouse, even though its dues-paying membership remained small. The pro was Tony Sylvester, assistant pro Al Jamison, whose family name was Giammatteo and whose brother became Glen Echo's fire chief. In 1930 Bannockburn could not pay its taxes or the interest on its loan, and began selling off land. A Philadelphia combine started buying the land, took possession of the club in the late 30s and rented it out when it still claimed 200 members. Bannockburn operated as public course while various creditors fought out ownership in the courts. The legal issues were settled in 1942 with a foreclosure and auction which was won by the Philadelphians for \$92,000. The U. S. Navy used the course during World War II for "rest and recreation" and after the war the course became a co-op housing development. The clubhouse still stands and is used by the community.⁷

The generally accepted story is that Burning Tree grew out of impatience on the part of a golfing foursome at Chevy Chase. One man, Marshall Whitlatch, found a pair of farms on River Road at \$300 an acre and Walter Tuckerman added thirty acres of his own. The Founders (always in caps) put up \$10,000 each and added to that as they went

along. They cleared the land, raised a stone clubhouse and by the time they were finished had invested \$242,000 and held \$300,000 in mortgages. Club president Isaac Mann had put out the most held a second mortgage and contributed the gatepost and driveway. The club opened in 1924 and was praised from the start. It has been marked by traditional Sunday foursomes, gin rummy games and no women. It remains men only, the sole survivor of that tradition in the area, despite a long and losing fight to retain its \$150,000-a-year, open-space tax break.⁸

Congressional County Club is a story of bad planning and good luck. It was the idea of two Indiana congressmen who promoted it as a meeting place for government officials, legislators and businessmen. They began selling life memberships at \$1,000 each and signing up big names such as the Rockefellers, DuPonts, Herbert Hoover, Charlie Chaplin, and Woodrow Wilson, whose doctor, Admiral Grayson, became membership chairman.

By 1922 the first nine holes were ready but Persimmon Tree Road was not. The Club hired a pro and on Decoration Day 1923 the first 18 hole course opened, producing one of the greatest traffic jams in local history, rivaling even Avenel's recent Kemper tournaments. Visitors paid \$1 on weekdays, \$2 on weekends to play. In 1923 with 500 active and 600 life members, who paid no dues, the club began work on its clubhouse and floated a \$400,000 bond issue to pay for it. Within a month the treasurer reported that the club, where everything was done on a grand scale, was operating at a deficit of \$12,000 per month. The board negotiated a loan to meet its mortgage payments, asked for dues in advance from those who paid dues, and later requested loans from all members. Finally in 1928 with membership falling, the club was refinanced through Acacia Mutual Life.

The Depression hit the club hard. It produced a wave of resignations, unpaid bills, and bounced checks. Life members were asked to pay dues, most refused. Prohibition repeal pumped some life back into the club, but the red ink continued. The clubhouse was rented out to various groups and the club stumbled along until April 1940, when Acacia foreclosed. It was a friendly and negotiated bankruptcy with Acacia lending some \$300,000 with which the club was bought. Second trust holders went to court, and the club ended up in limbo with board members paying employees out

of their own pockets. The issue finally was settled and the burden of lifetime members wiped away. Then the war came, membership fell to about 200, gas was rationed and joy riding forbidden. But Congressional got lucky. The Office of Strategic Services (OSS) rented the place and it became Area F in 1943. After the war, the government poured money into the club, it recovered and has been more than healthy for the last half century.⁹

Woodmont began with a group of German Jews who founded Town and County Club in Washington D.C. In 1916 they bought 116 acres north of Battery Lane in Bethesda, converted Dr. Armistead Peter's frame and stone summer house, Winona, into a comfortable clubhouse and by 1922 were playing golf, 18 holes on nine greens, and enjoying meals on the back porch. Woodmont had a fine ballroom and card rooms. The pro had a slot machine that paid off in golf balls.

During the war Woodmont was generous with the USO, hosting dances, parties and tournaments. In 1947, shortly after the club opened its long anticipated back nine, the government announced its intention to purchase the golf course, the Peter estate and the Visitation convent, adding 300 acres to the National Institute of Health's sprawling campus. MNCPPC operated the links as Glenbrook public golf course for several years with Roger Peacock as pro and one-dollar greens fees. Meanwhile Woodmont, under the leadership of Leopold V. Freudberg, who had overseen the expansion of the golf course, found a new home near Rockville and prospered.¹⁰

Argyle County Club is another club with a rather confused history. It was organized in Washington D.C. in late 1921 for the "promotion of social intercourse and athletic pastime." The club's first golf course was in Petworth, a site used by Columbia and then by Woodmont. The Club bought 114 acres near Colesville and Forest Glen roads, well out in the country, and developed a nine-hole course, but in 1945 several stockholders gained control and sold the property to the County. It became Sligo Golf Course, the first of MNCPPC's courses.

Club members led by Samuel Solomon then bought a 145-acre farm off Layhill Road in Silver Spring. Perc LeDuc, a member who had designed the original layout, presented a proposal for 18-holes and converting the barn into a clubhouse. Soon two corporations, the Land Company and the

Country Club were operating with the same directors but separate accounts. In effect the non-profit club rented the facilities from itself. The first nine opened in the spring of 1947 and members donated hundreds of volunteer hours to course maintenance as more stock was sold. Golfers learned to cope with horses, cattle and sheep wandering in and got in the habit of picking up stones as they played. In 1963 a new 15-year lease was signed and then a new clubhouse was built. In the mid-1970s the club found it could not pay the rent and taxes and eventually the Land Company took over. This led to a lawsuit but a peaceable transfer followed in 1976. A separate Argyle Club Corporation was formed, and it operated until 1991 when it was dissolved and the two entities merged.¹¹

The sprawling Indian Spring Club, now well north of Silver Spring, began as a theater owner's hobby near Four Corners in 1924 and was purchased by developer Abraham Kay in 1939. Kay intended to build houses on the land and started to do so before being persuaded that a club open to Jews was a good idea. The building of the Capital Beltway forced a move in the 1950s and Indian Spring opened its spacious new clubhouse in 1957, but some of the old club property remains as park department land and the old stone clubhouse is now the Silver Spring YMCA.

The Manor Club was the brainchild of the leaders of a group called the Syndicate, more formally the 16th Street Highlands, namely Howard Duckett of Prince Georges County and E. Brooke Lee of Montgomery County. They bought 431 acres west of Georgia Avenue in 1922, set aside 200 acres for a 27-hole golf course and other facilities, and then laid out building lots. The first one hundred purchasers of cottage lots, as they were called, also received life membership in the club, which was to become free of encumbrance when 100 lots had been sold. By 1926, 18 holes were in play and 85 lots had been sold. Lee claimed "we were the first group in the county to sub-divide homesites with the inside lots facing the golf course . . ." The lots sold for \$1,250. The club weathered some difficult times, but has been a successful operation for many years.¹²

The Kenwood Club has a somewhat similar story except that ownership of the club is privately held by the Chamberlin family. Edgar Kennedy acquired the property in 1926 for about \$1100 an acre. Kennedy took on Donal Chamberlin, Princeton '21, as his partner and they set to

work clearing building lots and transforming meadows into a golf course. Large deep lots were platted on wandering streets along which cherry trees were planted. The golf course opened, as promised, in 1928 and the clubhouse was finished by that fall. No Bethesda-area community is more closely identified with a country club than Kenwood, where club membership came with home ownership. These days the club claims some 1800 members is known for its beauty, especially when the cherry trees are in bloom.¹³

The Lakewood County Club began in 1959 offering 300 lifetime memberships for \$1,000 or resident membership for \$350 with a limit of 700. Many big names appeared on the advisory board and Sam Snead and Ralph Bogart actually had a hand in the club's organization. The management admitted by October 1960 that it had mortgaged the property to finish work on the clubhouse. An accounting was requested and in December 1960, at a noisy general meeting, an insurgent group took over. The new Board of Directors asked for an injunction and an accounting. The Federal Government asked for \$360,000 in income taxes and \$125,000 in excise taxes. The promoters claimed that one they could complete the project and filed a \$10.5 million suit. An audit showed that of the more than \$1.5 million taken in from more than 1100 lifetime and 670 resident members \$640,000 had been spent on the golf course, pools, tennis and unfinished clubhouse, \$380,000 on operating expenses and the remainder on advertising, management fees and loans to promoters and others.

The new Board asked for contributions to keep the club running. By May, when they had a rock picking party, members had contributed nearly \$20,000. In December 1961 Lakewood became a member owned non-profit country club that owned 13.5 acres and leased about 200 acres. The club settled the tax liens and the pending litigation and with 1300 dues-paying members and a court appointed conservator overseeing the operation, they faced the future. In 1964 the conservator was discharged and the clubhouse completed. Lakewood has had reasonably smooth sailing since then.

The newest home development-county club layouts is TPC at Avenel which got started on 1019 acres in 1979, right next door to Congressional Country Club. It went through long and strenuous disputes, hearings and court fights over zoning land and other issues, all under the leadership of developer Anthony M. Natelli. Now, as planned, the

clubhouse is surrounded by some 850 homes. The golf course opened in 1986 and regularly hosts PGA tournaments.

There are several other country clubs in Montgomery County, including Norbeck whose golf course opened in 1954 and which survived a major fire in 1966, and the International Monetary Fund's Bretton Woods Recreation Center near Violet's Lock, established in 1968 to provide non-discriminatory facilities for its employees. Over the years other clubs have disappeared including White Flint, one of the earliest clubs; Sam Eig's Washingtonian Country Club; and Brooke Manor on Georgia Avenue. The Edgemoor Club deserves a mention as the oldest of the neighborhood tennis and swimming clubs. It began in 1920 on land acquired from developer Walter Tuckerman and absorbed the Dunbarton Tennis Club in the late 1920s.¹⁴

Today there are 10 public golf courses in the County, several private courses like those at Montgomery Village, and Leisure World, and at least fifty neighborhood pools and tennis clubs.

William Offut is the author of *Bethesda: A Social History*, available at the Historical Society Library.

NOTES

¹ See Eileen McGuckian's *Gazette* article for Peerless Rockville, Jan. 15, 1986.

² Most of the above from James Mayo, *The American Country Club*, 1998.

³ Judith Beck Helm, *Tenleytown, D.C.*, 1981. John M. Lyman, *The Chevy Chase Club, A History*, 1958. Joan F. Marsh, "Early Days at the Chevy Chase Club," *Montgomery County Story*, November 2001.

⁴ Henry L. West, "The Columbia Country Club As It Was in the Beginning," 1938. *Columbia Country Club, 100 Years of Spirited History*, 2000.

⁵ *Montgomery County Sentinel*, June 13, 1913, and *Washington Evening Star*, June 14, 1913.

⁶ *Bethesda Country Club History*, Dr. Drosdado M. Yap, 1979. *Bethesda Tribune and Bethesda Record*, May 18 and May 25, 1945. William Offutt, *Bethesda, A Social History*, 1995.

⁷ Offutt, *op. cit.*, pp.115-117.

⁸ *Burning Tree Club: A History*, 1962.

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- ⁹ Carlisle Bargeron, "The Congressional Story," 1957. Anne Riley Dolan, Congressional Country Club, 1984. *Congressional Country Club: Celebrating 75 Years*, 1999.
- ¹⁰ Woodmont Country Club 1913-1988, 1988. William Offutt, "The Bethesda USO," *The Montgomery County Story*, May 2003.
- ¹¹ Joseph M. Schrotz, editor. *Argyle County Club 1945-1995*.
- ¹² Peggy Barnhill and Grace Ann Coleman, *Manor Country Club*, 1998.
- ¹³ Washington Post, Sept. 13, 1931. "Kenwood," (golden anniversary booklet), 1978 and various issues of the Kenwood magazine of the 1930s.
- ¹⁴ Minerva Bassett, "Brief History of the Edgemoor Club," 1962.
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