

Founding Fore

Story by Larry Widen

In 1901, Milwaukee park commissioner August Rebhan proclaimed: "Golf is altogether the best open-air game ever devised by man. It is played in places where the air is pure, it gives an incentive for long walks and that it is doing a vast good for thousands in this city can no longer be questioned."



In 1895, the Milwaukee Country Club's founding members purchased nine acres of the George Greene estate, including a large home, on the Whitefish Bay toll road in Shorewood. Photo from the author's collection.

It was November, 1894. While in Chicago on business, Milwaukee real estate man John Tweedy and local banking executives James Ilsley and Grant Fitch were introduced to the latest European sensation — golf — which had recently caught on in the United States. When they returned to Milwaukee, Ilsley, Fitch and Tweedy immediately shared this discovery with more than a dozen of their friends, all of whom were instantly smitten with the game.

The group's first order of business was to find a suitable place to play. William Mariner, the owner of significant pieces of Milwaukee real estate, volunteered the use of some of his family's farmland on the city's East Side (a site that now includes UWM). For ease of play, the farm's fields were mown as close to the ground as possible, but mud-holes, uneven terrain and the cold, wet weather made the game difficult. No one even noticed, however, because this was simply too much fun.

The men used tin cans set into the ground for cups and they tied colorful bandannas to bamboo fishing poles for hole markers. Initially, their club

climate over which they had total control. Originally, golf was not part of this idyllic picture.

In March, 1895, articles of association were adopted, a slate of directors was elected, and initiation fees of \$60 were approved. Membership in the Milwaukee Country Club, as it was called, was limited to 200. The list of founding members read like a Milwaukee "Who's Who," and included the Pabst, Allis, Falk and Ilsley families.



An early Milwaukee golf enthusiast, "Lucky" Louis Allis, pictured here in 1897, received his first set of golf clubs from his mother when she returned from a European trip. Allis' son Ned grew up with the game, winning the state championship ten times. Photo courtesy of the Milwaukee Country Club.

sets consisted of one or two mid-range irons and a putter. When the snows finally set in, the little white golf balls became nearly impossible to see. Rather than give up playing the game, the men voted to use red balls. And lo, the Milwaukee Golf Club had been loosely organized.

As Milwaukee's pioneer golfers played through the winter, a prominent circle of wealthy men were exploring the idea of forming a "country club" that would provide them with a haven away from the stress of living and working in the city. The club was also seen as a way to create a social

Led by William Mariner, the Milwaukee Country Club was born on a nine-acre tract of land located on Lake Drive just south of Capitol Drive. The former residence on the site was renovated into a clubhouse, and in June, 300 people turned out for the grand opening.

Contemporary author John Gurda's centennial history of the Milwaukee Country Club details how the club's golfing members immediately began transforming the fields on the west side of Lake Drive. By August, the city's first private golf course, comprising just six holes

on leased land, was operational.

What began as a passion for the game suddenly became an obsession. Louis Allis and his friends went to Chicago for lessons to become better golfers. They played nearly every day, and shocked the community by playing on Sundays. Contests and tournaments were organized, a locker room was added and annual golfing dues were instituted to cover the cost of the never-ending upgrades. By 1898 the course had been expanded to nine holes and totaled 2,900 yards, and the original Milwaukee Golf Club had been assimilated.

As Milwaukee's elite played their game in relative seclusion, golfing fever raged throughout the rest of the city.

The city's first club, Milwaukee Country Club, already feeling the pressures of urban sprawl, relinquished their land on Lake Drive by 1911. The club moved to a 108-acre site on the Milwaukee river near Bradley Road, a space it still occupies today.

Around the same time, another group of die-hard golfers gravitated to a public course in the southern quadrant of Lake Park. Known as the Parks Golf Club, they governed themselves with volunteer directors and committee leaders. To make the relatively short course more challenging (the longest hole was 280 yards), club members staged competitive events on Saturdays, Sundays and holidays. Just after World War I, the Parks Golf Club changed their name to the Michiwaukee Golf Club and purchased 129 acres of land on Fairy Chasm Road in Bayside where they operated as the first North Shore Country Club.

The passion for golf ignited by James Ilsley, Grant Fitch and John Tweedy more than 100 years ago in the Maryland Avenue cow pasture (presently the site of the UW-Milwaukee student union building), continues to flourish to this day with no indication of abating. 🏌️‍♂️