

Living



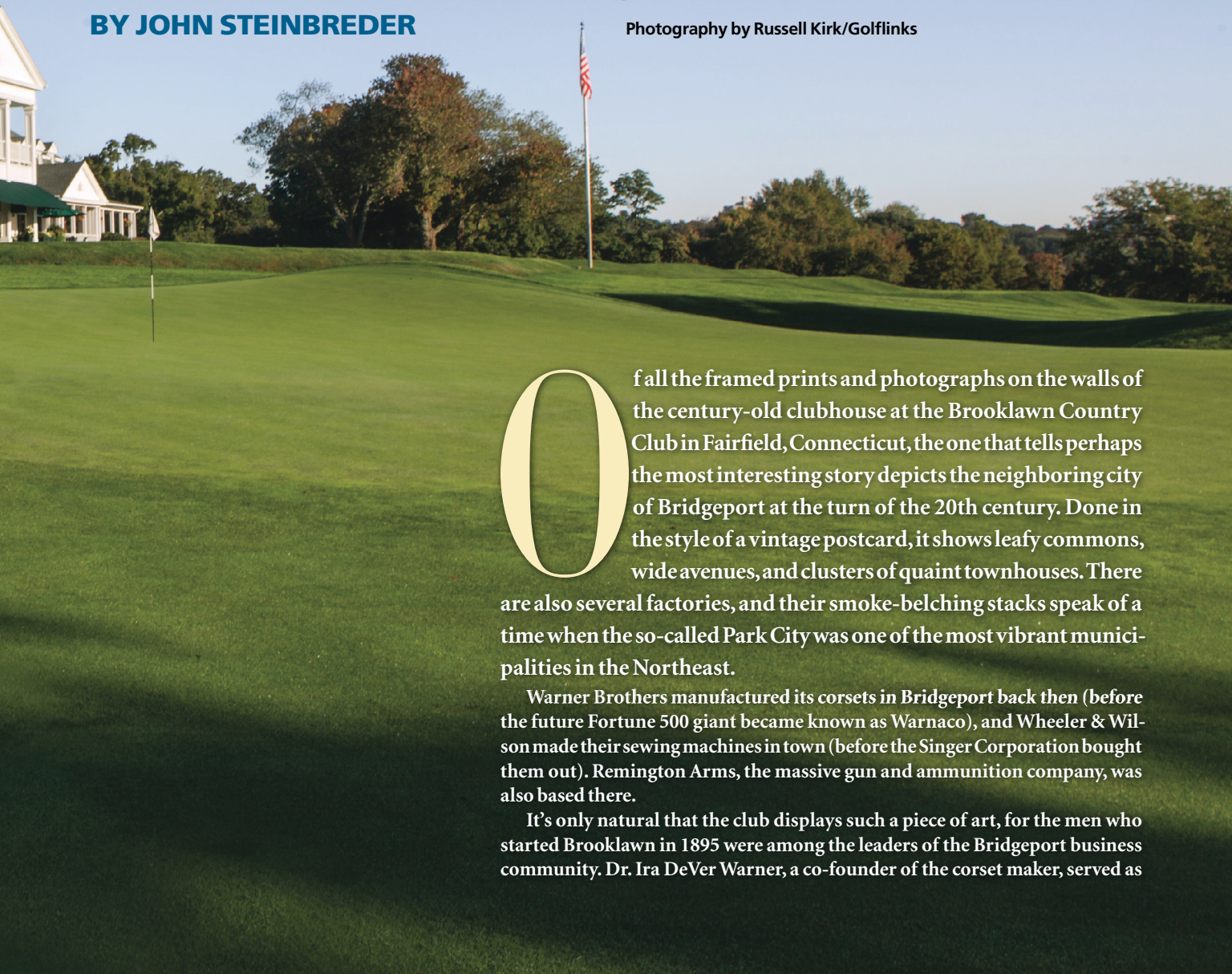
The Brooklawn clubhouse sits beside the eighteenth green, which slopes distinctly from back to front and left to right.

History

Brooklawn Country Club is proud of its Tillinghast golf course, its community roots, and its role in the life of “the Squire”

BY JOHN STEINBREder

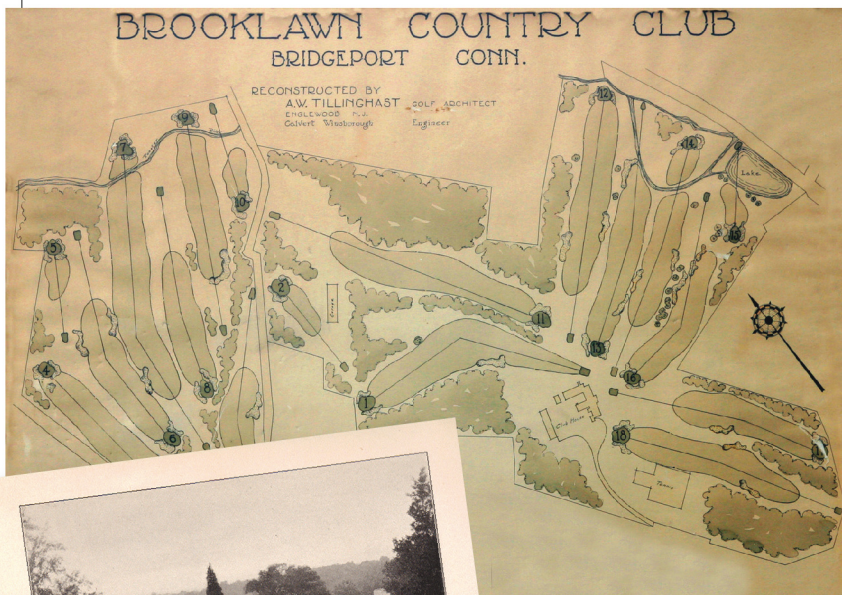
Photography by Russell Kirk/Golfinks



Of all the framed prints and photographs on the walls of the century-old clubhouse at the Brooklawn Country Club in Fairfield, Connecticut, the one that tells perhaps the most interesting story depicts the neighboring city of Bridgeport at the turn of the 20th century. Done in the style of a vintage postcard, it shows leafy commons, wide avenues, and clusters of quaint townhouses. There are also several factories, and their smoke-belching stacks speak of a time when the so-called Park City was one of the most vibrant municipalities in the Northeast.

Warner Brothers manufactured its corsets in Bridgeport back then (before the future Fortune 500 giant became known as Warnaco), and Wheeler & Wilson made their sewing machines in town (before the Singer Corporation bought them out). Remington Arms, the massive gun and ammunition company, was also based there.

It's only natural that the club displays such a piece of art, for the men who started Brooklawn in 1895 were among the leaders of the Bridgeport business community. Dr. Ira DeVer Warner, a co-founder of the corset maker, served as



ty as well as some additional acreage, and then lengthened and altered the golf course. Five years later, it purchased the nearby Cornell Farm and expanded the layout to 18 holes.

Brooklawn held its first club championship in 1901, and not surprisingly, Archie Wheeler came out on top. He also prevailed in the second playing of that tournament, in 1902. There are no listings for a club champion in the next three years, from 1903 through 1905, because in each of those years the Wheeler twins met in the finals, and they did not want the winner of those matches to be recorded for posterity. Willie Wheeler, who played golf both left- and right-handed, took the Brooklawn crown in 1906 – then there is another three-year gap on the club championship board, from 1907 through 1909, indicating a few more face-offs between the Wheeler brothers.

The Wheelers contributed to golf at Brooklawn in another important way when a Bridgeport teenager visited the club to see about a job in the pro shop. A sixth-grade dropout who worked at Remington Arms, young Eugenio Saraceni had developed a strong game at the now-defunct Beardsley Park municipal golf course. The professional at Beardsley, Al Ciuci, suggested to his counterpart at Brooklawn, George Sparling, that he meet with the youngster. Sparling obliged, but he pronounced himself unimpressed after watching Saraceni hit some balls on the practice range. Archie and Willie Wheeler had witnessed the session, however, and they liked what they saw – enough so to persuade their professional to hire the lad. Sparling took him on as an assistant and club maker, for \$8 a week.

The year was 1918 and the boy – who became better known as Gene Sarazen, eventual winner of two U.S. Opens, three PGA Championships, a British Open, and the Masters – ended up working for two years at Brooklawn. It may have been a short business relationship, but the golfer was forever connected to the club and also to the Wheelers. Sarazen visited Brooklawn frequently through the years, and still holds the record for the par-71 course, a 63. He was made an honorary member of the club, and he dedicated his autobiography, *30 Years of Championship Golf*, to Archie Wheeler, among others.

Not long after Sarazen left Brooklawn, another golf persona of note came calling: architect A.W. Tillinghast, whom the club hired to revamp its layout, which had been designed and expanded over the years by its members. The plan Tillinghast produced for that project now hangs in the Brooklawn clubhouse; he changed roughly seventy percent of the actual routing and completely rebuilt all 18 greens and the bunkers that surrounded them.

“Tillinghast made Brooklawn like many of his courses, with all the fun being on the greens,” says

the club’s first president. Archie Wheeler and his twin brother Willie, whose parents founded the sewing machine concern, were two of its best golfers in those early years. They and the other original members made Brooklawn a popular family retreat that provided well-to-do area residents a convivial place to relax and socialize.

Today, the club boasts some 400 members, and its A.W. Tillinghast golf course is among the finest in the state, well regarded as a track for casual weekend play and also as a site for the occasional USGA championship, and for regional tournaments like this summer’s Senior Met Open.

While golf is the most popular amenity, Brooklawn’s members also enjoy the spacious swimming pool during sultry Connecticut summers, the seven Har-Tru tennis courts, and the paddle tennis and bowling facilities (especially when the weather turns). The kitchen in the 58,000-square-foot clubhouse keeps busy throughout the year, as does the bar in the Grill Room.

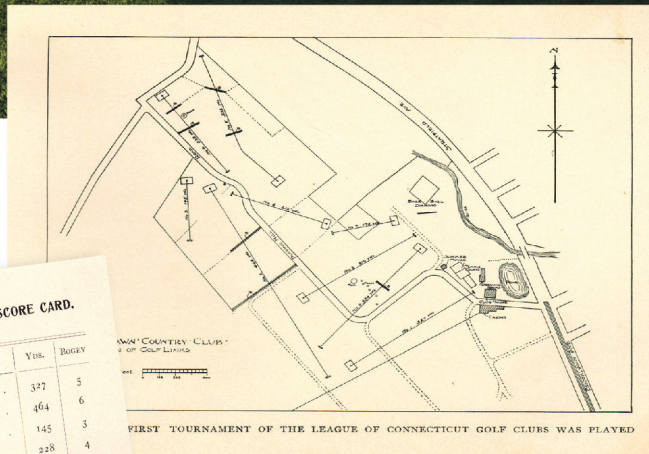
The club’s founders built Brooklawn on 60 acres of farmland that they rented from the Clapp Spooner family. Barns were converted into a locker room, a game room, and a dance hall. Members built a baseball diamond, tennis courts, a trap shooting range, and a pair of bowling alleys to go along with their nine-hole golf course that measured 2,599 yards. In its second year of operation, Brooklawn joined the recently created United States Golf Association, becoming one of the first twenty-five clubs to become part of that group.

In 1905, the club bought the Spooner proper-

Top: A.W. Tillinghast’s plan for the full eighteen holes hangs inside the clubhouse.

Middle: A group including the golf captain – a position that still oversees club competitions – prepares to tee off at “the Altar,” the 215-yard sixth hole on the original nine-hole course that played to a “bogey 4.”

Bottom: Archie Wheeler, left, chats with two attendants in the bag room.



HOLES AND BOGEY SCORE CARD.

No	HOLES	Yds.	Bogey
1	BROOKLAWN	347	5
2	LONG	464	6
3	THE CHESTNUTS	145	3
4	TULIP	228	4
5	EDGEWOOD	372	5
6	ALTAR	215	4
7	THRISTLES	178	3
8	TOLSOME	316	5
9	HOME	354	4
TOTAL		2599	39

AMATEUR RECORD 82

do everything he wanted.”

Tillinghast nonetheless produced a formidable par-71 layout, finishing the job in 1931. According to the club, it is one of the last courses he built in its entirety.

Brooklawn has taken great pains over the years to preserve the essence of its Tillinghast design while also updating the golf course, mostly by lengthening some holes so that it now measures 6,711 yards from the tips. An extensive tree removal project has preserved the original architectural intent as well as improving air flow and turf health. More than a dozen of Tillinghast’s planned fairway bunkers have finally been added. For the past nineteen years, members have relied on input from designer Ron Forse, who specializes in restoring classic golf courses and has worked on fourteen Tillinghast tracks to date, as well as from Brooklawn’s talented superintendent, Peter Bly, who has worked there for 39 years.

“Brooklawn has some of the best conceived and constructed green sites in the country,” says Forse. “They have great variety and character, and each one presents its own set of challenges. Tillinghast did a beautiful job with them.”

Club heritage is important to the people at Brooklawn, and that is demonstrated in a number of ways. The clubhouse has the feel of a quaint golf museum, thanks to the memorabilia that histori-

Bob Moriarty, a longtime club member and former head of both the Golf and Greens Committees. “They are small and well-contoured, they cant back to front, and if they are running any more than 10 on the Stimpmeter, you cannot be above the hole without being at great risk of three-putting. And the bunkers that guard them are such that you cannot short-side yourself, if you have any hope of making par.”

The current chairman of the Golf Committee, Bill Wallace, enjoys showing visitors Tillinghast’s plan, which is dated September 1929. He points out the fairway bunkers the designer drew on that document that don’t appear on subsequent aerial photos of the course. “It probably had to do with timing, because about a month after Tillinghast produced the plan, the stock market crashed,” he says. “There probably was not enough money to

Top: Bunkers menace the approach on the 16th hole, viewed here from behind the green. Middle: A map of Brooklawn’s original nine holes, with the baseball diamond at center-right. Bottom: A scorecard for the original nine.



J.C. Healey, Al Ciuci, George Sparling & Gene Sarazen
Brooklawn Country Club
1918

J.C. Healey, Al Ciuci, George Sparling, and Gene Sarazen at Brooklawn in 1918.

an Athan Crist has displayed on the walls; there are some real gems, among them the medals Gene Sarazen won in his professional career. Brooklawn has also honored the Squire by naming its men's three-day member-guest the Sarazen Invitational, and there is an August member-member called The Archie—for Archie Wheeler, of course. In 1969 it started the Borck Junior Golf Tournament for players under age 17, named for Jay Borck, a promising junior golfer from the club who died when he was just 16 years old. The Borck event is held

on various courses in Fairfield County. More recently, the club has revived The Brooklawn Invitational, a two-man stroke-play event for top area amateurs that was originally contested from 1922 to 1944.

Hosting outside events is another way of celebrating Brooklawn's heritage. The club has been the venue for many Connecticut State Golf Association and Metropolitan Golf Association events, including the 1919 Met Amateur. It served as the stage for the 1974 U.S. Junior Boys; the 1979 U.S. Women's Open; the 1987 U.S. Senior Open, won by Gary Player; and the 2003 U.S. Junior Girls. And it hopes to make its biggest splash yet in a few years: Brooklawn is submitting a bid to host the 2021 Solheim Cup, the women's equivalent of the Ryder Cup. The bid documents are due this June; Rick Ryan, who is heading up the club's efforts, says, "The Solheim has never been held in the Northeast, let alone in its biggest market. We are the only club in Connecticut that's ever hosted [a USGA men's or women's] Open, the only one that's held four USGA events. The membership is psyched, and we're going to give it our best shot."

The once-booming city of Bridgeport has fallen on hard times, and bears little resemblance to the place in the vintage image on Brooklawn's wall. For the venerable club, however, under stewardship that honors the past while accommodating the present, the future is brighter than ever. ■

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