HISTORY OF THE FOXBURG COUNTRY CLUB

BY NANCY J. KETNER*

It is believed that the Foxburg Country Club, located at Foxburg, Clarion County, in Western Pennsylvania is the oldest permanent club and possesses the oldest permanent golf course in continuous use in the United States. This golf course was founded by Joseph M. Fox in the year 1887, one year before St. Andrew's Golf Course was founded at Yonkers, New York.

Mr. Fox was born in Philadelphia on February 4, 1853, developed as a cricket player at Haverford College, where he was graduated in 1873. After his graduation and admission to the bar, however, he made his summer home in Foxburg, in the Fox Estate Mansion which was left him by his grandparents. A cricket team was assembled to compete in a series of amateur matches in Ireland, England, and Scotland in 1884. Mr. Fox was among those selected to play. Upon his return from Scotland, he brought home clubs, balls, and molds and set up the first golf course on the lawns of the Fox Estate Mansion in the year of 1885. This course was private and only the friends of the Fox family played on it. In the year 1887, Mr. Fox moved the course to its present location—along the high ridge between the Allegheny and Clarion rivers.

The first golf course was very crude and had only five playable holes for the first year or two. There was no regular income or clubhouse, no caretaker, and just a few "natural" greens. It was really an abandoned cow pasture. It was enlarged from five holes to nine holes in 1888, and later grew to eighteen holes, but the newer nine were subsequently abandoned, leaving only the original nine.

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The Foxburg Golf Course is now considered to be rather short, as can be expected of one which was laid out before the invention of the rubber-cored ball. It is a very picturesque course with old stone sand-and-water containers; there are several producing oil wells nearby, and it boasts just about the world's greenest golf green.

After Mr. Fox brought the original clubs, balls, and molds home from Scotland, they made most of their own golf balls as the sporting firms didn't begin offering golf equipment until 1896. The first golf ball was made from feathers, and the price was $5. The next ball produced was made of a tar product and was called the "gutta percha." One of the Foxburg treasures is a mold in which many of the "gutta percha" golf balls of that era were formed.

The name of this course was at first "Foxburg Golf Club" but the name was soon changed to "Clarion County Golf Club." When it became apparent that players were being drawn from the counties of Armstrong, Butler, and Venango, it was decided that it would be more diplomatic to revert to the Foxburg name. Since then it has been known as the "Foxburg Country Club." The land for the Foxburg Country Club was made available by Joseph M. Fox, its first president. The club purchased the original land which it had been leasing in 1924, and it has since acquired some additional land to accommodate changes in the course. The original sand greens are now grass.

Several years after the men had organized their club, a ladies' golf club was formed, of which Mrs. Major R. Morgan was the first president. Although the groups used the same course, they were entirely separate organizations with their own rules. They have played a prominent part in all the activities there.

The claim that Foxburg has the oldest golf course in the United States is set forth in the notarized affidavits of five distinguished residents of three neighboring communities. These include Mr. H. J. Crawford, Emlenton; Mr. C. H. Adams, Parker; Mr. C. A. Miller, Foxburg; Mr. Harry Harvey, Foxburg; and Mrs. Major R. Morgan, Foxburg. These individuals can remember dates and certain events that took place when the new golf course was started.

The key witness for Foxburg is Harry Harvey, a ninety-year-old man, who stimulated the founding and progress of the club.
Mr. Harvey was present at the organization of the Foxburg Country Club in the year of 1887; at the organization meeting, he was elected secretary and treasurer of the club. He held this position for fifty-four years. Mr. Harvey relates that he took care of the simple details of running the club with the sole assistance of a small notebook into which he entered the names of the members and the dates on which they paid their dues, originally one dollar a year. During the confusion of moving, Mr. Harvey lost the notebook with all his records and dates in it, but he can still remember the dates, along with the other four witnesses, who can prove that Foxburg has the oldest golf course in America. Mr. Harvey is believed to be the oldest living golfer in the United States.

Plans have been made for erecting a monument in honor of this golf course, but so far only a plaque has been placed on the corner of the course. It was thought that a replica of the Fox Mansion would be the best, since it was on the grounds of the Fox Estate that the Foxburg sportsmen first learned the game of golf.