



## THE MILWAUKEE COUNTRY CLUB AND THE FORMATION OF RIVER HILLS

By Douglas H. Frazer

### The Milwaukee Country Club

started in 1895 on Milwaukee's East Side as the Milwaukee Golf Club. Golf was the rage. The course was bounded by Locust Street on the south, Hartford Avenue to

the north, Downer Avenue on the east, and Oakland Avenue on the west. Membership rose to 200 in 1901 and then slid; the problem was space. Enthusiasts were establishing other country clubs, including the Fox Point Club, in "country" settings with a lot more land.

The problem was solved when Gilbert Hickcox identified a 108-acre parcel in the Town of Milwaukee bordered by the Milwaukee River, Range Line Road, and a south entrance road. The Club purchased the property on January 28, 1910, for \$34,000 and reconstituted itself as the Milwaukee Country Club. The Milwaukee Northern electric railway was soon dropping off members and staff on its way to Sheboygan.

The course covered just over 6,100 yards, including 16 holes on the original 108 acres and two more on the "Bradley plot" across the river. Architect (and member) William Schuchardt designed the Mediterranean-style clubhouse. The grand opening occurred on July 4, 1911. "The clubhouse," commented John Gurda, the author of *A Sense of Tradition: The Centennial History of the Milwaukee Country Club* (1993), "provided a setting for activities worthy of the Great Gatsby."

In 1924 the Club purchased an additional 77 acres of rolling riverfront land to the south from club member Spencer Ilsley and redesigned the course.

The Club's existence was, in essence, the reason for the creation of the Village of River Hills. Says Gurda, "[I]n hindsight, like closing the windows before a storm; it helped to seal out external forces that might have threatened the welfare of the Club and the domestic tranquility of its members."

The Milwaukee gentry, and some non-gentry, were moving north. Shorewood, Whitefish Bay, and Fox Point all saw significant population increases.

A second migration developed along the upper Milwaukee River. Well-to-do Milwaukeeans purchased gentlemen farms around the Club. They sought to "enhance their own property values, and at the same time, protect the perimeters of their favorite institution."

Incorporation provided the means: 2,600 acres in the Towns of Milwaukee and Granville. Approval for the Village of River Hills came on April 12, 1930, by a vote of 141 to 15.

The Village of River Hills adopted stringent building restrictions. The zoning ordinance required minimum five-acre lots and banned commercial development. Reporters described River Hills as an "Exclusive Country Club Village" and "the Utopia of the Plains."

The Milwaukee Country Club continues as the Village's "anchor" institution. Explains Gurda, "The Club's founders sought to create a common culture that expressed common expectations. Its hallmarks were stability rather than stodginess, a taste for the gentile rather than a stiff-collared stuffiness. One hundred years later, nothing of essence has changed... The Club remains as it was in the 1890s, a safe haven and a second home, a private retreat for a distinguished federation of peers."

*Douglas H. Frazer is a Fox Point resident and neighborhood contributor as well as the village president. The views expressed are his own and not necessarily those of the Village, the village board, other village board members, or Best Version Media, LLC.*



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