

Happy 100th birthday Picton Golf Club

"Picton has one of the finest nine-hole golf courses in the Province. Situated on the shores of the Bay of Quinte the location is a most delightful one."

— The Picton Gazette
Centennial Edition
December 29, 1930

By John D. Lipson
Special to the Gazette
To have called the original nine holes of the Picton Golf Club one of the finest in the province would have required an extra dollop or two of civic pride. But there is no questioning the fact that the site was indeed a delightful one. It was spectacular in 1930 and remains so today, a treasure and a joy to behold (photos at right).

The 1930 Gazette article makes reference to the 1907 purchase of the "present links" (this would include the entire clubhouse side of the highway and a few acres on the other side), spear-headed by a group of Picton golf enthusiasts that included, notably, H.B. Bristol. Mr. Bristol was the proprietor of Picton's finest department store, which eventually became the local Eaton's. (The building next to the new Post Office still bears his name.) He also donated the Men's Club Championship trophy for annual competition, which was replaced in 1976 by the Fred Purcell Trophy. (Much more about Fred later.)

The precise origins of the original nine are shrouded in the mists of time. We don't know who designed or built it. Maybe it doesn't matter because the original nine has ceased to exist since 1961.

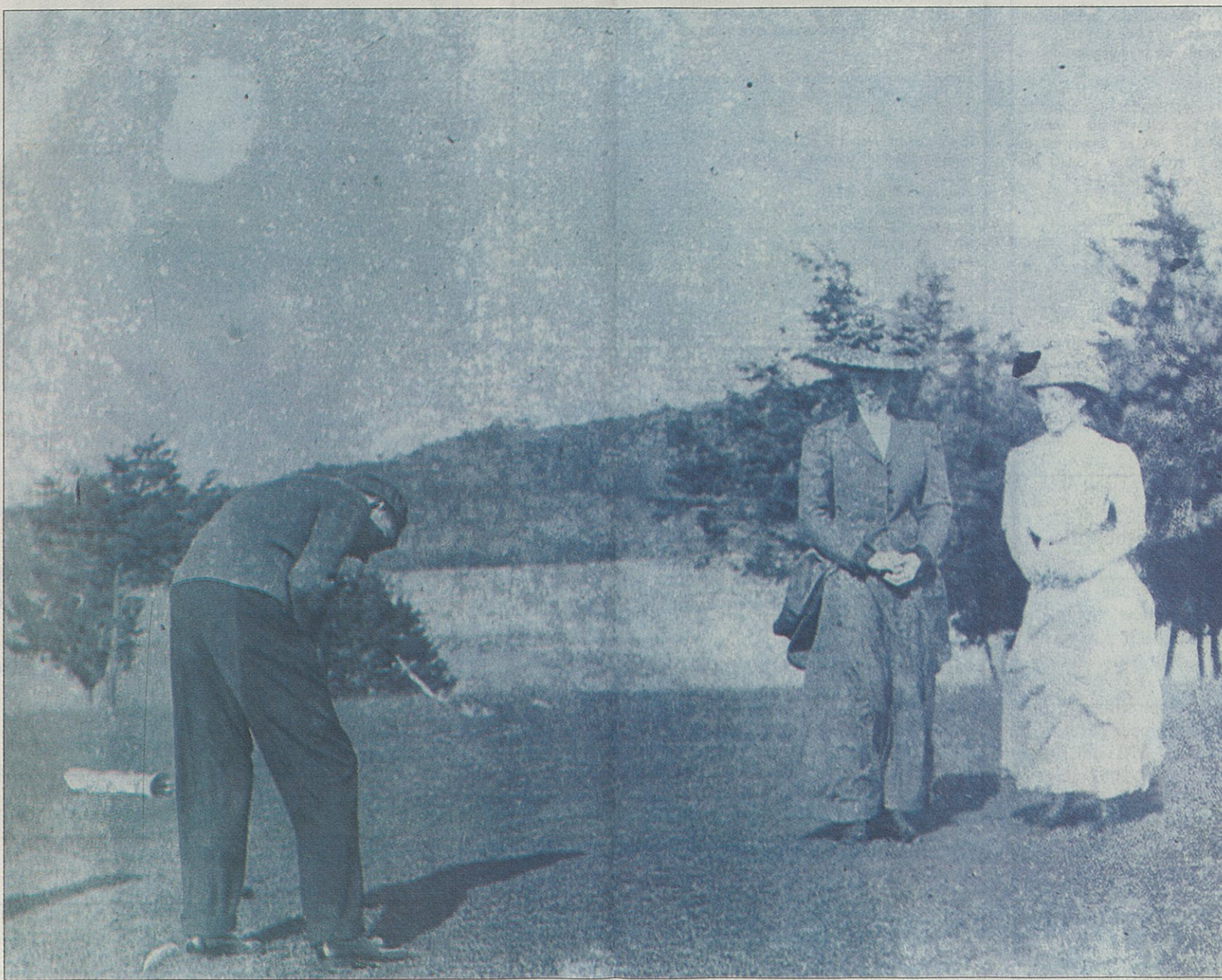
It occurred to this writer, sadly, that with the passing of Walt Fraser there are very few of us left that remember that old nine. The original nine certainly deserves at least passing mention because it served the club so admirably for the first half of its one hundred year history.

The original nine was quaint, quirky, and (for a neophyte like myself) oh so much fun to play. The par five second hole (road hole out) might give the reader a sense of the original nine. Picton's road hole was even more exciting than the more famous one at St. Andrews. For in Picton you had to drive across the highway (yes the highway), taking care of course to miss the traffic. The excitement didn't end there. The fifth hole (road hole in) was a challenging par three that required yet another perilous tee shot across the highway. Fortunately those were quieter times, but still there were many close calls.

Starting in the mid-50s there were increasing calls for a new, modernized golf course. I recall Dr. Jim Clapp, Jack Goodwin, George Ross, and Homer Shields as being in the vanguard of that movement. Now every movement needs a catalyst, and that catalyst came to the Picton Golf Club in the person of Fred Purcell.

Fred was appointed golf professional in 1953, thanks in part to an enthusiastic recommendation from Dick Green, Picton's very first golf pro (1926-1928) (Dick Green and Fred both hailed from the north of England; Dick went from Picton to a long and illustrious career as Cataragui's Head Professional).

In the next 25 years, Fred Purcell and the Picton Golf Club would become forever linked. Fred did it all. From dawn to dusk, he ran the pro shop, repaired clubs, maintained the golf course, and gave lessons. When he afforded the time, which was rarely, he also played a wonderful game of



View from Ninth Green circa 1910.

Submitted photo



Gazette photo by Rick Fraalick

Gathering Off Eighteenth Green, May 2007 – Front row: Ladies' club champions Evelyn Drew, Sue McGill, Pat Williams, Kathy Richards, Val MacDonald, Donna Walby. Back row: Past president Sterling Johnston, course architect Steve Ward; men's club champions Larry Pero, John D. Lipson, Leo St. Denis, Carl Stacey, Jeff Salt, Scott Bigg, Tim Clark, John Henry MacDonald.

golf, typically two or three under par. But his most important role just might have been as a goodwill ambassador. Fred had this unique knack of making you feel like the luckiest person alive for having the good sense to choose golf as your game. For visitor and member alike, Fred made the Picton Golf Club a most pleasant place to be.

Starting in the fall of 1956, Fred applied his prodigious talents and energy to the construction of the new nine (which we now call the old nine). I can still see Fred constructing the new greens with their exquisite contouring and bunkering, all done single-handedly with a shovel and

a tractor (ably assisted by Bill Drew for the really heavy going). The new nine was ready for play Opening Day 1961. We all knew that a bright new era for Picton golf lay ahead. And so it is to this day. Fred's lasting legacy to the club is that wonderful course he designed and constructed.

The 1990s brought a new challenge to the club due to the ever increasing popularity of the game – overcrowding. Although there was general agreement that expansion to 18 holes would be desirable, there was an overriding problem – where to find the funds necessary for modern golf course construction? Kudos to successive boards of

directors and long-serving club president Sterling Johnston who worked indefatigably to bring the new course to fruition.

The club was most fortunate to have as one of its members Steven Ward, the acclaimed architect of Trillium Wood and Timber Ridge. The new nine holes that Steve designed are truly wonderful, with mammoth contoured greens of St. Andrewsean proportions, water and woods that force you to aim down the middle and pray, and breathtaking vistas at every juncture. It is a credit to both Steve Ward and Fred Purcell that the new nine holes blend so naturally and seamlessly with the old nine. And the same

feeling prevails as back in 1961: a bright new era for Picton golf is unfolding.

The Picton Golf Club has had some truly fine golfers over the past hundred years. It is with some trepidation that I make a very incomplete survey, with apologies in advance for the many oversights.

If Walt Fraser were still with us, he could tell us about the champions of the 30s and 40s. When I started playing in 1954, the club's elder statesman, Mr. H.B. Tully, could have told me about the earliest days of the club (alas, I wasn't interested; I was too busy trying to drive across the highway on the second hole). But I do remember the champions of

the 50s (proving that the memories of youth make the strongest impression). I recall most vividly the excellent play of Edna Pearce, Pierce Jones, and the Camp Picton golfers Chuck Coull and Roy Morrison.

(The club had a proud and close association with Camp Picton from before the war right through to the late 60s. In those days one of the highlights of the season was the annual Town versus Camp competition. My recollection is that Camp Picton usually won but made appropriate amends by providing truly delightful hospitality in the Officer's Mess after the day's competition.)

So much for nostalgia. Picton champions of more recent vintage would rank most highly even in a 100 year survey.

Donna Walby has won an incredible 18 ladies club championships, 11 of them consecutively. Other multiple winners include: Val MacDonald (eight wins), Ruth Dersnah (four wins), Dita Adams and Vivian Kidnew (three wins), Sue McGill and Pat Williams (two wins).

The reigning ladies club champion is Casey Ward, winner of seven consecutive junior girls club championships and the 2006 junior club championship (which raises the interesting prospect of a future club champion who just happens to be a lady).

On the mens side, Leo St. Denis won nine club championships over a remarkable 31 years. Leo was club champion in four different decades! Other multiple winners include: Carl Stacey and John D. Lipson (five wins), Mike Pero and Jeff Salt (four wins), Lou Garrison, Scott Bigg, and John Henry MacDonald (three wins), and Bert Kea (two wins).

John Henry MacDonald, the reigning mens champion, did himself and the club proud when he qualified for match play at the 2006 Canadian Men's Amateur. In a thrilling first round match, John Henry took eventual champion Richard Scott to the last putt on the 18th green. (This was arguably Scott's toughest match of the tournament.)

For both of our young club champions Casey Ward and John Henry MacDonald interesting stories are unfolding. Stay tuned.

We are especially proud of two Picton golfers who emerged victorious in wider arenas.

Mike Pero, four-time club champion, won two provincial championships: the 1984 Ontario Boys Junior Championship and the 1989 Ontario Mens Amateur. Mike was an all-America member of the Miami University of Ohio golf team, involved in NCAA competition with the likes of Steve Stricker and Chris DiMarco. In the early 90s Mike turned pro and enjoyed much success on the Canadian Tour, including four PGA Tour starts. He continues to be associated with the club and its junior program.

Lou Garrison won three club championships in the mid-60s, turned pro, and eventually competed on the Senior Tour. In 1987, Lou won the prestigious Senior CPGA crown, topping a strong field that included hall-of-famers Al Balding and Moe Norman. As a consequence of this national victory, Louie was invited to compete in the Senior British Open at Turnberry, Scotland, where he acquitted himself most admirably. One of the many highlights of his tournament week was a practice round with Gary Player (the eventual winner) and an accolade from the great man, "Louie, you have a fine golf swing." The stuff of dreams – and Louie did it. Sadly, Lou was felled by cancer in 1992 at the age of 55.

Golf is sometimes regarded as a metaphor for life (and golfers are often accused of forgetting the metaphor part). In Picton and the County we have a community which built two schools at the same time, a new hospital, and a new community centre, all under conditions of great crisis. It is entirely fitting that such a community should have one of Ontario's finest golf clubs – and it does.

Happy Birthday, Picton Golf Club!

Here's to the next 100 years.