

Middlesborough's Place in History

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There are throughout the East a number of golf clubs which would welcome designation of their courses as the oldest in the United States, or the second or third oldest as the case may be. However, few have been able to establish their claim. In the haze of recollection and legend which surrounds the history of American golf, few facts are more difficult to establish than the order in which various golf courses were laid out.

Certainly one of the oldest courses is that of the Middlesborough Golf Club, in Middlesborough, Ky. It may be, in fact, junior only to the course of the Foxburg Country Club, in Foxburg, Pa., which was laid out in 1837, and a twin of the course of the Tuxedo Club, in Tuxedo Park, N. Y., which was built in 1839 and is being forced off its original property this year by the New York Thruway.

As in so many of these cases, there is no evidence except that which derives from the memories and words of men. Researchers have found no documents to corroborate recollections that the course came into use in 1839. Furthermore, while the course can be conceded to have been in play at about that time and is still in play today, question has been raised as to whether play there has been continuous.

The best available witness, and a firsthand one at that, has recently come forward to testify for Middlesborough on both counts.

"The playing of golf over the Middlesborough golf course has been indulged in without interruption from 1839 to 1954," says Arthur Rhorer, 69, an attorney at law and life-long resident of Middlesborough.

How It Started

Middlesborough lies in a most unlikely location for a role in golf history, and it had no golfing patron. The town of 15,000 persons is tucked away in Yellow Creek Valley, in the Cumberland Moun-

tains of southeastern Kentucky, and Alexander A. Arthur, a Canadian more interested in financial promotions than golf, projected it into golf history.

Arthur made an industrial investigation of the Yellow Creek Valley in 1836 and then went to London bankers with a plan which envisaged the purchase of 100,000 acres and the formation of a company to exploit mineral and timber resources.

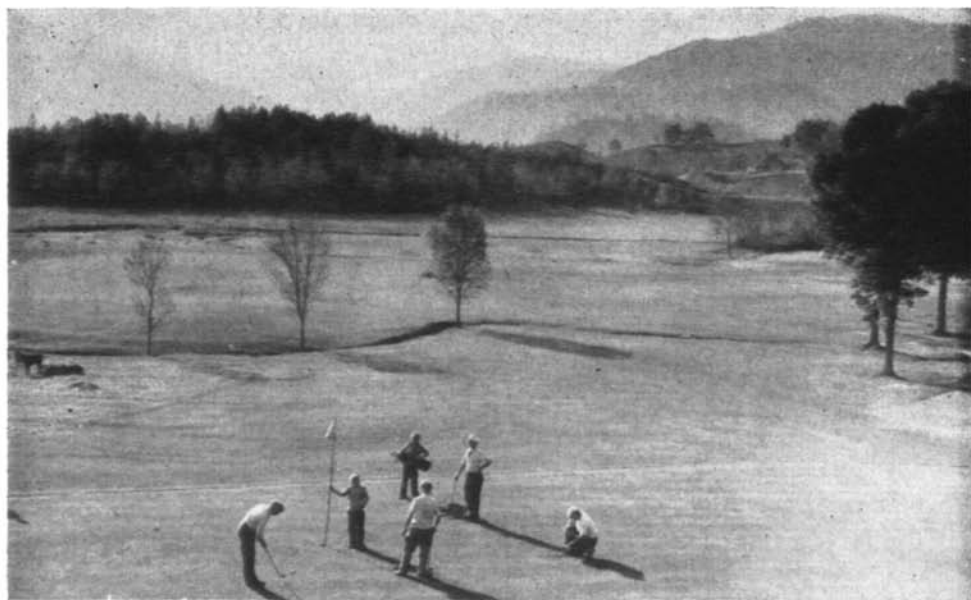
London viewed this vast plan favorably, and in the latter part of 1838 English and other immigrants began arriving in numbers in Yellow Creek Valley to inaugurate a boom.

They came direct and brought their customs intact, creating an island of English ways in Kentucky. The town, which took its name from Middlesborough in England, acquired such street names as Amesbury, Balmoral, Chester, Chichester, Dorchester, Exeter and Winchester. Chickens and eggs were purchased in terms of shillings, and butter by the firkin. Tea was served every afternoon at 4 o'clock. And, quite naturally, a golf club was founded and a course was laid out in the fertile valley. The latter events are said to have occurred in the spring of 1839.

The history of the Middlesborough Golf Club must now be traced through the memory of men like Arthur Rhorer, who states the case in this way:

"My family moved to Middlesborough in February, 1890, although my father came to Middlesborough in the fall of 1839. When we came to Middlesborough, a group of English people and a few local people were playing golf on the same layout as used by the local golf club now, with the exception of one hole and tee which was near the intersection of 25th Street and Worcester.

"The course had nine holes, and those holes were located in the exact area the present golf club occupies.



The course of the Middlesborough Golf Club, Middlesborough, Ky.

"I do know it had a membership which paid dues, but it had no club house. It was a group well known and recognized as a golf club. The membership was composed almost entirely of the English folks who founded Middlesborough. Possibly a few Americans were on the roster, mostly Episcopalians headed by their beloved pastor, Dr. John Snead, although the game was not generally understood or participated in by Americans living in Middlesborough.

"I do know this golf club existed and functioned from 1889 to 1893 or 1899. I shagged (caddied) for the members in 1895 and 1896—just 10 and 11 years old but the players wanted young boys at lower pay."

Some of the twenty or thirty original players were Arthur, Charles Adams, Arthur Cameron, John Marshall, Cocky Masters, Dr. Snead, Arthur Taylor, Horace Twiss, Edgar and Frank Watts, Piers Warburton and Fred Willett. Their number also included three or four women, notably the Misses Ethel and Mary Railton.

The Middlesborough boom reached

its peak in 1893 and then expired in the financial crash in England.

Since Middlesborough existed at that time almost solely to implement Arthur's vast promotion, the English then went as they had come. By 1899, most of them had departed, leaving the community to American families.

The precise status of the golf club from 1899 to 1916 is difficult to determine because of the conflict of evidence. Mr. Rhorer states, however, that, "From 1899, the English membership dwindled, but local people became interested, joining the club and continuing club activities, until 1916." These activities, he says, included the sporadic playing of golf by a few enthusiastic old members and some new converts. Assessments were levied periodically on the membership, he says, rather than dues.

In 1916, a transfusion of sorts was accomplished. The club reorganized and acquired some seventy-five members. There was no change in either the name or the site of the club, then or at any other time. In 1921, the club finally purchased the land it had used over the years and built the club house it has since occupied.