

# The Edmonton Country Club

## Established 1896

An historic course that exemplifies Alberta's perseverance and golfing spirit.



Life couldn't be looking finer. It is a sharp blue September afternoon at the Edmonton Country Club. Despite a slight bite in the wind and a few leaves yellowing on the poplars beside the North Saskatchewan River, golfers today are teeing off in short sleeves.

This moment of golfing tranquillity is especially memorable as the course, once on the city's barren outskirts, is now an oasis of rolling green within a prairie metropolis of over one million.

### Three Clubhouses Burned

Yet ... it wasn't always so idyllic at this historic club. Since its inception in 1896, the club has fought its way through three financial restructurings and name changes, and has lost three clubhouses to fire — one intentional, one accidental and one just a rumour.

There have been two forced relocations, armed robberies, murder-suicides, bigamist weddings, Supreme Court challenges to shareholder rights, course redesigns including moving nine holes from the river valley to the prairie above, and even three Lady Godivas riding naked through the property.

But such is the way of golf in Alberta: a struggle to overcome unforeseen challenges with the sure prospect of bright summer days ahead. Without doubt, the Edmonton Country Club is proof that Alberta golf has an indomitable spirit.

As a founding club in the 1912 formation of the Alberta Golf Association, the Edmonton Country Club (first formed as the Edmonton Golf Club) had been in operation since 1896 (town population 1700), making it the second club formed in the province. Fort Macleod was first, in 1895.

### Evicted From Their Course

The club's first course, laid out in 1896, was five, ill-defined and often perilous holes on Hudson's Bay Company land below the North Saskatchewan River escarpment, beginning near where the Legislature buildings are today. The first hole ran down the hill just missing an old graveyard at the bottom. The course then crossed rutted wagon tracks before working its way uphill again to finish at the clubhouse, the former residence of the Hudson's Bay Company's factor (headman).

When Alberta became a province in 1905 and Edmonton was chosen as the capital, one of the new government's first steps was to acquire land from the Hudson's Bay Company and serve an eviction notice on the golfers. The golfers relocated west of their old course to what is now the site of the Victoria Park course.

In 1906, following a smallpox outbreak in which the clubhouse was commandeered as an isolation hospital, government officials burned it to the ground.

Then the city bought the remaining land from the Hudson's Bay Company and, once more, the golfers were told to look for another place to play. (Victoria Park would become Canada's first municipal course.)

This frequent uprooting of courses was inevitable in the days when clubs rented or squatted on open pasture. To buy land for a golf course seemed unnecessary with so much vacant landscape available as fairways. But, with the rapid expansion of the population, real estate became increasingly valuable and the golfers, many of them businessmen, eventually realized that it was time to invest in their own land if they were to continue playing.

The Edmonton Country Club, 1913.





Early Edmonton golfers wore office attire in keeping with the gentlemanly nature of their game, ca. 1913. *Edmonton Country Club.*

#### 426 acres at \$100/acre

In 1911 the club purchased 426 acres – at \$100/acre – eight miles upstream of Edmonton on the North Saskatchewan River. Through some clever land swaps with farmers and real estate developers hoping to cash in on future ‘Country Club lots’ the club eventually owned enough playable land to build an 18 hole, 6360 yard, par 73 course that was open in time for the 1913 Alberta Golf Association provincial championships.

Two months after the course opened, the new clubhouse burned down, ironically one day after the club’s water well had been drilled. Slightly embarrassed, the members rebuilt.

Nine of the holes were on the river flats and nine on top of the bank giving the members a serious cardiac workout: it was strictly sweat and willpower that enabled golfers to conquer the punishing climbs up the banks and through the deep ravines that drained top land creeks into the river.

The road from Edmonton to the club was notoriously treacherous and muddy in wet weather, a very convenient situation for the married men who were forced to spend a weekend at the club playing cards and drinking until horses could pull the vehicles onto city-maintained roads.

#### Your Pay: Take Two Cows

Then came WWI, 1914-1918, and with it falling agriculture prices and cancelled memberships. The club did everything it could to hang on, even combining the role of club pro with greenkeeper and then settling his wages by paying out ‘two cows’ instead of cash.

The club closed the lower nine to cut back on maintenance and, as a demonstration of golfing despondency, only three members attended the annual meeting.

1919 brought two well-remembered days to the club’s history. On one, after a prohibition-era tournament, the members located two cases of Irish whiskey. “There was a fight in every corner and a — in every bunker,” one member reported of the celebrations. On a more traditional note, H.R.H. The Prince of Wales visited the club, signed the guest book as Edward P, ate his lunch, and golfed.

#### At the Ladies’ Insistence

By the 1920’s, when golf enthusiasm and prosperity had been revived and the sport was enjoying a world-wide boom, the club had recovered from near-bankruptcy and was restructured as the Edmonton Golf & Country Club. Solvent, the members could afford to build a footbridge spanning 290 feet across the ravine by the 18th, and gravel the road to the club, ‘mostly at the insistence of the ladies,’ as members recall.

The club hired Dunc Sutherland as its professional and manager in 1920 who, in addition to a being a noted teacher, was a respected player. When the flamboyant Walter Hagen, Jr. – fresh from his victories in the 1924 and 1925 PGA Championships and the 1924 British Open – drank and golfed his way across Western Canada beating everyone who dared to show up for a match, he played Dunc at Edmonton.

On the way to the train station after the match, Hagen slipped Dunc \$50 when he heard the pro had not been paid a share of the purse.

#### The Club’s Depression-Era Benefactor

The Depression of the 1930’s brought the club to its financial knees again but was bankrolled at its most desperate moment by a wealthy member, Col. James Ramsey.

Ramsey bought out the majority of the last-hope debentures offered by the Club in 1934, enabling it to not only stay in operation but also to move the bottom nine holes onto the top bank. In today’s dollar value, Ramsey put up close to \$1 million, a debt which he forgave in his will, except for a minor amount.

“Pop” Brinkworth, the club’s dynamo ground superintendent, designed and built the new nine holes and was credited by the RCGA for constructing “the best par three’s of any course in Canada.”

Then came WWII. From financially flush, the club like many others went onto life-support for the most part of the war as reduced memberships, rationing of gas and liquor, cancellation of tournaments, and a dwindling public interest in golf made even the most determined golfer wonder if life would ever be wonderful again.

1942 brought Pat Fletcher to the club where he doubled as the pro and club president until after the war when he moved to Saskatoon. Fletcher would become the last Canadian (1954) to win the Canadian Open.



Edmonton CC players loosened up their attire rules for tournaments and left their jackets in the clubhouse, ca. 1913. *Edmonton Country Club.*



Forced to reorganize once again, the club emerged in the mid-1940's as The Edmonton Country Club, partially financed by the sale of land and new memberships. Never again would the club slip into insolvency.

### **Stanley Thompson Renovates The Course**

Stanley Thompson, acknowledged today as one of golf's greatest course architects with notable courses such as the Banff Springs and Jasper to his credit, brought his distinctive ideas to the club beginning in 1944.

The redesign of the 18th Hole across the ravine would become one of his signature works, and one which he incorporated with a photograph in his international advertisements. "Mother Nature has provided a perfect setting for this par three eighteenth," Stanley Thompson wrote.

The redesign was almost fully completed in 1947 as the club noted in the program for the AGA Open held there that year.

"The course has been brought up to championship standard, and has been lengthened to 6,660 yards, making it a real test of golf."

### **Knickers, White Shoes And Stockings**

Along with Alberta's leading amateur Henry Martell, who had previously won the Open nine times and was the winner of the 1946 Canadian Open, the tournament featured an exhibition by the South African "Master Shotmaker" Bobby Locke who wore, as always, his knickers, white shoes and stockings.

### **The Rumoured Clubhouse Fire**

Probably because of the two earlier clubhouse fires, today's members have generally accepted that their existing clubhouse, built in 1956, rose from the ashes of a fire. Not true: the 1913 clubhouse was demolished when the oil-era prosperity of the 1950's demanded a change.

### **The Oilers and Charitable Golf**

In recent years the club's hallways have heard the footsteps of numerous renowned athletes and golfers: from the soft-spiked ladies competing in the 1996 LPGA du Maurier Classic to the heavier treads of the Edmonton Oilers led by Wayne Gretzky and his teammates who began a tradition of charitable fundraising through golf at the ECC.

And, as regards the less-illustrious but juicy club tales of murder-suicides, bank robbers, and bigamists ... they are all true, documented and stored in the club's archives for disclosure to history sleuths and other interested parties.

Besides being fortunate to have a course alongside a picturesque river valley with the changing terrain elevations that make golf a challenge, the club is also fortunate to have an atmosphere of camaraderie founded on more than a century of traditions.

### **18 Historic Holes**

To commemorate many of the club's legendary members and occurrences, each hole has been assigned an historic designation, ranging from "The Brink" which honours Pop Brinkworth's contribution to the new nine of 1934; and the "Grizzly" named to honour the gold prospector who in the winter of 1898 holed up on the bank of the river by the site of the Club's present course.

So, in the end perhaps it is not only the club's perseverance that has enabled it to withstand the challenges of golfing in Alberta ... it is also the club's determination to maintain the traditions that demonstrate the determined spirit of Alberta's golfers.