

# The Architects of Alberta's Golf Courses

With only horse-drawn equipment to move earth, the early architects of Alberta's golf courses preferred to retain as much of the natural landscape as possible in their course designs.



Fortunately for these pre-diesel power architects, the river valleys of Alberta – from the North Saskatchewan to the Bow River by Banff – provided all the variations in elevation and physical challenges golfers could expect to handle.

## Pacing Off Holes

The informality of Alberta's first courses reflected their temporary nature. The Calgary Golf and Country Club was the first to buy land, in 1909, for a permanent course. Until then Alberta clubs leased, rented or squatted on the pastures where they played and were unwilling to invest more than the minimum to layout tees and greens, knowing they would soon have to relocate.

## Tom Bendelow, Alberta's First Course Architect

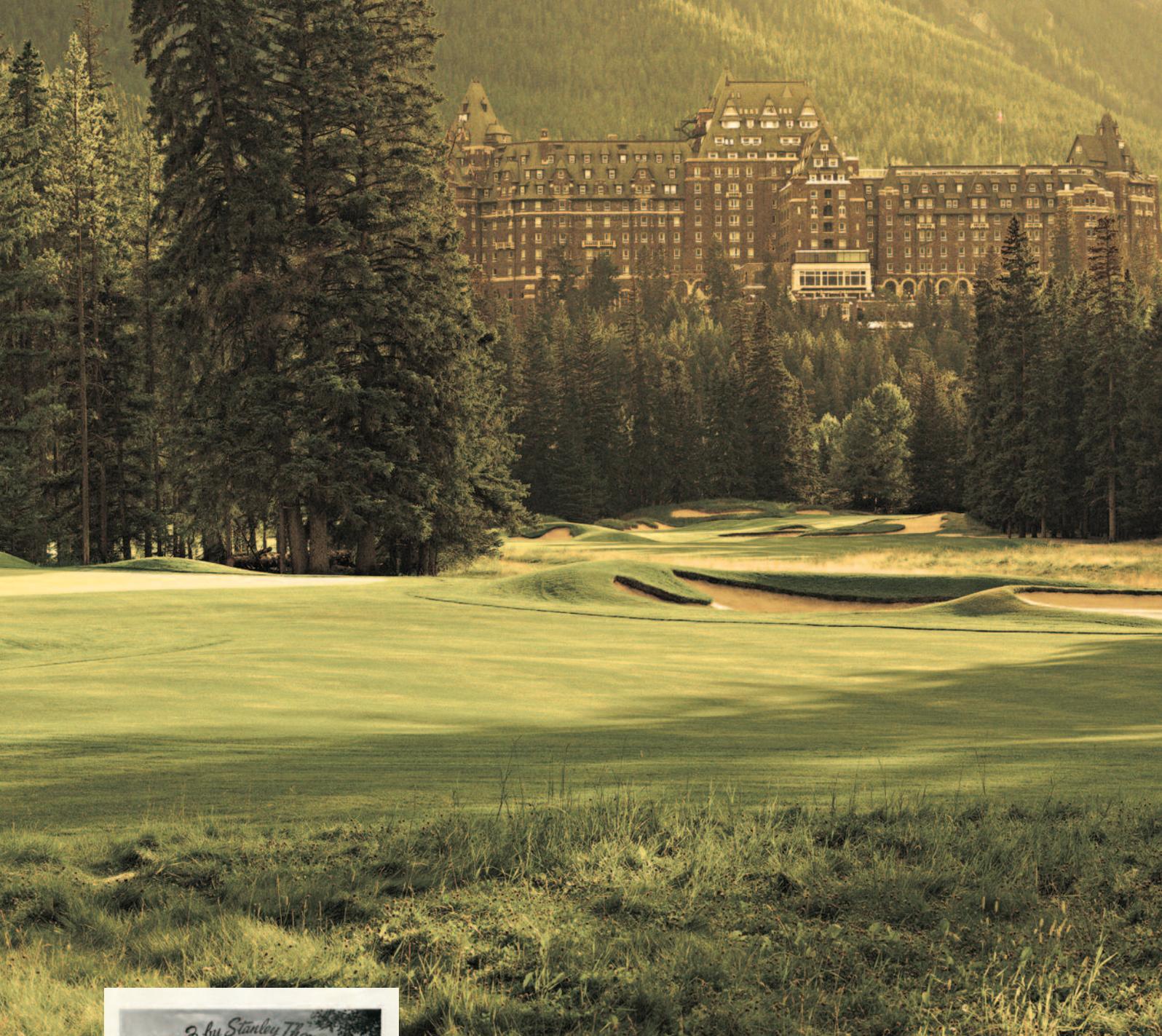
Calgary hired the Scottish architect Tom Bendelow, known as "The Johnny Appleseed of Golf Courses," in 1910 to lay out 18 holes along the sloping banks of the river. This course opened in 1911.

Bendelow, employed by the Spalding companies as Director Of Golf Course Development, crisscrossed North America staking new courses as golf's popularity grew. For a few hundred dollars, in a day or two Bendelow could drive in enough stakes for a club to lay out tees, bunkers and greens that followed the natural terrain. His low fees were, in fact, subsidized by Spalding who hoped to sell a new club all the equipment it needed to open the course.

The Bendelow design usually included the popular cross bunkers: ditch-like obstacles that ran the width of the course intended to punish golfers who lacked driving ability.

## Willie Park Jr.

In 1922, the Calgary club hired Willie Park Jr. to redesign the course as golf course architecture entered its "Golden Age." Park, a Scottish champion, golf author and club maker, would be described many years later by course historians Geoffrey Cornish and Ronald Whitten as "perhaps the first true genius of golf course architecture." In 2005-2007, after decades of modernizing the layout, the Club restored the course based on the original Willie Park Jr. intention.



Fairmont Banff Springs Golf Course - designed by Stanley Thompson.



Stanley Thompson promotes the work he did on the Edmonton Country Club course.

### Edmonton - Best Par Threes

The Edmonton Country Club in 1911 paid \$125 to L.G. White, an American of unknown reputation, to "lay out their links," according to the club's history, *"The Early Years."* White stayed on the club's payroll at \$80 per month during the construction and seeding phases.

This course, opened in 1912, was played on two levels, nine holes on the top bank and nine holes on the river flats.

The lower nine holes were moved to the top of the river bank in the 1930's and were designed by "Pop" Brinkworth, the club's dynamo superintendent credited by the RCGA for constructing "the best par three's of any course in Canada."

As is typical of the course evolution that matches changes in golf equipment and golfer expectations, The Edmonton Country Club hired Stanley Thompson in 1944 to redesign the entire course. In doing so he created the club's spectacular 18th Hole that spans a ravine.

### H.S. Colt's 1912 Fee: \$25,000

The Bowness Club, on the west side of Calgary, brought in the famed American H.S. Colt who had a Canadian reputation based on his 1912 design of the Toronto Golf Club. The Bowness land developer paid Colt \$25,000, just before a disastrous drop in the real estate market forced the project into near bankruptcy. The course survived on sand greens until the 1960's before it closed.



### **The Fairmont Banff Springs Golf Course**

The Fairmont Banff Springs Golf Course is the Alberta course that best reflects the adaptations made by architects over the years to accommodate a difficult terrain and the development of golf technology.

Originally built by the Canadian Pacific Railway as an attraction for their Banff Springs Hotel, the first nine-hole course opened in 1911 and was designed by the Scottish pro William E. (Bill) Thomson.

*"Banff Springs Golf"*, a well-documented book on the course by Banff historian E.J. Hart, describes the fairways on the Bow River flats as mown, natural montane grass with cross bunkers and square sand greens.

The Federal Government took over the course in 1919 and hired Donald Ross to create a challenging 18-hole layout. Ross, Scottish, of course, and, like Willie Park Jr. a golfer of international fame, worked from a full topographical survey – something to which earlier course designers would not have had access.

Lack of funds stopped the full implementation of the

Ross design although the course soon became a must-visit for international golfing tourists and competitors.

The CPR took over the course again in 1927, during the height of the pre-Depression golf fever, and hired Stanley Thompson to design a course that would rival its chief competitor, the CNR course at Jasper Park Lodge, also designed by Thompson and completed in 1926.

### **The 'Heroic' Course**

Between 1911, the year the original Banff course opened, and 1927, the typical golfer had switched from hickory to steel-shafted golf clubs and was hitting new types of balls capable of much further distance. As well, golfers had begun to expect the fairways to be watered, and mowed by tractors.

According to E.J. Hart, Thompson's goal at Banff was "to build a course of the 'heroic' style where players of different abilities could challenge their way to the green."

Thompson's 'heroic' course, Hart points out,

combined the old Scottish strategic courses where a premium was placed on free swinging distance shots with few traps, with the 'penal' courses that placed emphasis on accuracy.

### **"... it cost money to work with rock."**

At Banff where Thompson faced the massive job of moving tons of rock and bringing in topsoil, he not only had to overcome natural challenges but also financial ones.

When asked by *The Canadian Golfer* what the course would cost, Thompson would only reply, "... it cost money to work with rock."

Thompson's work remained more than satisfactory into the 1990's. With Parks Canada approval, another nine holes were added in 1989, designed by Geoffrey Cornish and Bill Robinson. Cornish had worked as a young man with Stanley Thompson on the course.

In 1997, architects Les Furber and Jim Eremko of Golf Design Services of Canmore were given the



assignment of restoring the original Stanley Thompson 18 holes in a manner that recreated Thompson's intent.

From tee boxes to greens, the architects restored what they could based on the equipment and skill of 1920's golfers and made adjustments to create challenges for today's golfers.

**Today's Course Architecture**

While restorations of the 'Classics' such as the Banff course reflect a growing trend in golf course architecture to return to the strategies and playability of yesterday, modern architecture in Alberta reflects the diversity of golfers and the Province's demographics.

Today, we see imported architects like Jack Nicklaus who offer Albertans the US Open style, power-hungry fairways.

But, most important, we see architects like the province's Puddicombe family bringing us the



Sid Puddicombe an Alberta architect with international credentials, at work in Japan.

picturesque challenges that are attracting families and communities to golf; and our multiple Alberta Amateur winner Harold Pasechnik whose precise thinking and precise playing are reflected in designs that combine strategy, skill and strength.

The gallery of architects working in the province today includes at least a dozen or more names familiar to most Albertans such as Gary Browning, Jeff Mingay, Bill Newis and Rod Whitman.

Perhaps, one hundred years from now, golfers will be speaking with the same reverence of these architects as they speak today of Stanley Thompson and Willie Park Jr.