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## The Kingdom of Golf in America

Richard J. Moss

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# *The Kingdom of Golf in America*

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*The Kingdom of*  
**GOLF**  
*in America*

RICHARD J. MOSS

*University of Nebraska Press*  
*Lincoln & London*

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## *Acknowledgments*

This book is the product of a long life in golf and a scholarly life that turned out better than I deserved.

I grew up in Jackson, Michigan, a great golf town. Much of what I have said in this book is shaped by my early life in a town that took golf very seriously. Teaching pros Chuck Smith and Ken Douglas gave free lessons. There were courses on which I could play all day for fifty cents. People for whom I caddied passed on free balls, paid my way to tournaments, and became range buddies. One older gentleman, in particular, convinced a callow teenager that the game posed philosophical, even religious, questions. After that I could never think of golf as merely a silly game.

At Michigan State University Douglas Miller and Russel B. Nye allowed me to think seriously about the history of popular culture. In recent years several individuals have eagerly provided support and the best sort of criticism. Bradley S. Klein of *Golf-week* has made this book better in countless ways. His thoughtful readings of this and earlier manuscripts have been invaluable. Orin Starn and Jim Dodson have provided encouragement and have served as examples of people who take golf seriously. I owe a considerable debt to the United States Golf Association. Research into the history of golf would have been virtually impossible without access to their library and research services provided on the Internet. The most immediate guardian of



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It has been my privilege to be a regular on a golf discussion show on WEEB Radio in Moore County, North Carolina. The others on the show—John Derr, Pat McGowan, Tom Stewart, Rich Mandell, and the creator of the show, Les Fleischer—have created a neat little world where the game is taken seriously every week. On the show I have had a chance to listen to smart people like Ben Crenshaw and Richard Coop talk about golf from their own extensive experience. Being part of the show has deepened and widened my perspective on the game.

I have played golf with thousands of people over the last sixty years and I have learned something from each of them. My play in the scrambles at Waterville Country Club in Maine and in the Monday Group and the Tuesday Golf Society at Pinehurst has profoundly enlivened my sense of what the game means to people. From this vast group of golfers let me dedicate this book to two of them. Let it be a small tribute to Dale Brown and Tim O'Day, princes in the kingdom.

## *Introduction*

My once-or-twice-a-week golf games have been islands of bliss in my life, and my golfing companions, whose growing numbers now include a number of the dead, are more dear to me than I can unembarrassedly say. Somehow, it is hard to dislike a man once you have played a round with him. —John Updike, “The Bliss of Golf,” 1982

Golf has always been a part of my life. There once existed a photo of me, now lost, taking some of my first steps aided by my father’s hickory-staffed brassie. I cannot remember a time when I did not care about how I was playing and when I would play next. In the last fifty years I have developed a profound fondness for a number of golf courses, both public and private. I feel more comfortable on a golf course than I do in my own bed.

So I find it difficult to think of golf as a hobby, a diversion, or a consumer choice. I do not like the idea that I am a small part of a big sport industry. Golf is not a commodity unless you think it is. Golf, as I have experienced and studied it, is a physical and mental place to be—in other words, a community.

I have tested this idea with some of my fellow golfers. The question put to them was, do you feel like you belong to a golf community? As an academic playing golf with nonacademics, I am subject to considerable suspicion when I ask such questions. Most, however, readily agree that they belong to a golf community. Most belong to a private club or have a membership at a

public course, and this obviously creates a sense of community, a sense of belonging. One went further and called this community “the kingdom of golf.” In this kingdom you are, he said, restrained by a set of rules and traditions. You are provided a slowly growing set of heroes. The kingdom has a founding, a history, internal divisions (parties), and a generally agreed-upon set of values. The official language is English but with a highly specialized vocabulary that can bewilder noncitizens. Obviously, the golf community offers several levels of citizenship. There are those who care deeply and make golf one of the most vibrant parts of their lives. There are many who only occasionally pass through the kingdom—transients of a sort. Oddly, there are those who watch others play but do not play themselves. Like all communities, the kingdom of golf has a hierarchy. It has developed a politics with leaders who claim the authority to protect and regulate the game. They pass laws that provide order in the kingdom. These laws generate controversy and are not always obeyed.

Finally, the golf community has a literature. It is a complex pile. At the bottom are national, regional, and local magazines. They began to appear almost as soon as golf, the game they chronicle, began to be played in America. They convey news and opinion; they do much to hold the community together. As we get nearer the top of the pile, golf literature gets more literary and philosophical. Works on heroes and great moments are common. At the very top are a small number of works that attempt to define the game’s essence and to place it within the larger history of sport and the nation.

This book is a history of the golf community in the United States. This history began in the 1880s and continues, of course, to the present. For 130 years, the kingdom has waxed and waned in response to larger historical currents. In the most general sense, the people who founded the golf community were responding to modernization. By modernization, I mean a set of forces that arose most clearly after the Civil War. For golf, the most important forces were urbanization and suburbanization operating in tandem. By 1890 Americans were confronted with

what might be called the new city. Golf was part of the adjustments that Americans (mostly affluent) made to the new city. The rise of the new city eroded the sense of community that most had felt prior to 1870. It also detached them from nature and plunged them day after day into a rapidly declining cityscape. Golf was just one of the many ways that people sought to reconstitute community, to revive a sense of belonging. It was also one way that Americans sought to reconnect with nature.

There were other modernizing forces that shaped the kingdom of golf. Technology was crucial in making the game more accessible (playable) for more people. Also crucial was the fact that Americans over the last 130 years have had more free time and money to spend on nonessential items. This is such an obvious fact that we often forget that people had to react to it. It is only recently in the grand sweep of history that average people have been confronted with the choices created by the existence of expanding discretionary time and income. Becoming a golfer was one of those choices.

Today the golf community is huge. It occupies a great amount of space and it has millions of citizens. Its growth in the last sixty years has been rooted in the spread of affluence and certain technological advances. As an economic reality, it is intensely complex. Just one aspect of this complexity is the split between golf as it is played and golf as it is watched. Huge corporations rely on the health of the golf community. On the other hand, owners of nine-hole courses in rural areas can envision opening for the season and no one shows up. Many people need the golf community to be big and healthy. The point of this book is to tell the story of how it got that way in the first place.

This book is not an exhaustive history of golf in America. I am sure that every reader will note an omission they view as tragic. Maybe I haven't given Sarazen his due. Maybe their favorite course designer fails to appear. There is no desire on my part to write a golf encyclopedia. Instead this book traces the growth of golf as a community with a complex set of parts, a community that has thrived inside the much larger American community.



## CHAPTER ONE

### From Nothing to Something

In March 1889 the *Philadelphia Dispatch* published a description of golf that provided a sense of what Americans knew about the game. This report began with the claim that “golf is played only by people accustomed to Scottish sports and Scottish scenes.” The game was played in Canada, but “even there it has not assumed the importance of a regular department of sports.” The newspaper stated that “no man should attempt to play golf who has not good legs to run and good arms to throw with.” The game is played from hole to hole on the dead run and there are no codified rules according to which the game is played, except that “an inviolable rule” forbids a player from touching the ball with his hands.

Approximately five years later, James P. Lee, in one of the first books about golf in America, provided a better description:

The general idea is easily stated. Starting from a given point with a small gutta-percha ball, it is the object of the play to show which of the competitors takes the fewest strokes to get his ball in a hole, let us say 400 yards distant from the starting point. He who does so is the winner. A full course consists of eighteen of these holes. The winner of the majority of them is the winner of the match. This certainly sounds simple; but there is much more to the game than would appear from such a statement.

Exactly. In five years golf in America had gone from very nearly

nothing to something. Joseph Lee's description, and particularly his notion that golf seemed simple but that this simplicity was an illusion, captured the essence of golf's early years in the United States. Golf was going through a process of birth and growth, and to understand that process requires that we understand not only the nature of the game in the late nineteenth century, but also the complex history of the years in which golf migrated from Scotland and England to the United States.

In the early days, golf in America was very much like a colony. The homeland was Scotland, England, and, to a much lesser extent, Europe. Affluent American males with Scottish backgrounds or the leisure to travel in Europe were the main agents of colonization. These men transferred the game to the United States by founding clubs that had as their basic purpose the construction of a course upon which to play golf.

The first lasting, important club was St. Andrew's Golf Club in Yonkers, New York. The animating force at the heart of this club was John Reid, the manager and treasurer of the J. J. Mott Iron Works at Mott Haven, New York. Reid was a Scot to his soul. He loved to drink Burntisland Scotch Whiskey and to sing Scottish ballads. Early in 1888, Reid and John B. Upham demonstrated the game of golf to a group of friends. Reid and Upham used a set of clubs that Reid's friend Bob Lockhart had sent from Scotland. The demonstration succeeded and Reid and his friends set out to find a place they could play. They ended up on a twenty-acre pasture owned by a butcher named Shotts. By November of 1888 a club had formed; it was called St. Andrew's Golf Club of Yonkers-on-the-Hudson. For four years the club was content to play on the tiny meadow near their home.

In 1892 the town of Yonkers needed to extend Palisade Avenue through their course. This forced the group to find a new home. They moved to an apple orchard nearby, thus giving birth to "the Apple Tree Gang." The "gang" established six holes among the apple trees and elected one particularly ancient tree

as a clubhouse of sorts—there they hung their coats and lunch baskets. The golf club began to draw members from a local city club (the Yonkers Club). Of the thirty-three original legendary members, most belonged to both organizations.

Soon it became clear that St. Andrew's was falling behind newer clubs that began to appear on the margins of New York City. The members decided to buy the Odell Farm in Grey Oaks. The land came with an ancient clubhouse that some thought was haunted. With this move the club began to look and act like a modern golf club. They hired a pro from Scotland, Samuel Tucker, and on April 14, 1894, they finally incorporated. In the incorporation documents they stated that the club's purpose was "to play the game of golf and provide proper ground for so doing."

When St. Andrew's incorporated in 1894, there were, according to Joseph Lee, about seventy-five golf clubs in the United States, most born "within the last year or two." Perhaps the most important of these clubs, and the first to incorporate, was Shinnecock Hills Golf Club. The idea for Shinnecock Hills was in fact born in Europe. Samuel L. Parrish, who was deeply connected to the club and to the early history of golf in America, describes, long after the fact, the way in which Shinnecock Hills got started:

While traveling in Italy in the spring of 1891, I received a letter from Biarritz, France, from my friend, the late Duncan Cryder, a summer resident of Southampton, in which he stated that he and our mutual friend, the late Edward S. Mead, were passing the winter in Biarritz and that they had both become greatly interested in a game called "golf" (my first introduction to the word) which they thought might be successfully introduced at Southampton, and played, possibly, on the Shinnecock Hills.

Cryder and Mead infected others when they returned to the States. They obtained advice from the Royal Montreal Club (founded in 1873). The pro at the Canadian club, a Scot named



Willie Davis, visited Southampton and passed along a load of clubs and balls for the new golfers. Two men, George R. Schiefelin and General Thomas H. Barber, made it their job to raise money for the new club. There was a meeting at Mead's house. By the fall, forty-four members of the Southampton summer colony had purchased shares in the venture. Several were women; unlike St. Andrew's, Shinnecock never nurtured a tradition of excluding women.

The building of the course and construction of the clubhouse proceeded swiftly. Willie Dunn, another Scot, designed a twelve-hole course and the noted architect Stanford White was commissioned to design a clubhouse that was completed in June 1892. The women organized the first event, a "grand golfing rally," in September 1891.

The original twelve-hole course quickly became congested. The club constructed a nine-hole course for women only. Samuel L. Parrish remembered that this "created a certain amount of dissatisfaction," and the nine-hole course and the original twelve-holer were abandoned and replaced by a single eighteen-hole course. In 1892 the club had seventy members and a long list of regular players labeled "season subscribers."

Until 1892 the activities at Shinnecock attracted virtually no interest outside the society pages of the local Southampton papers. It was Parrish's memory, however, that from 1893 onward "a veritable craze swept over the country, and the Shinnecock Club became the mecca for golfing pilgrims from other sections of the country seeking information before starting in to constructing their own links."

The birth of a third club, the Chicago Golf Club, illustrated not only the profound connection between golf in America and Scotland, but also the spread of the game outside New England and the Northeast. This club was the child of Charles Blair Macdonald, a crucial figure in the early history of golf in America. His father had sent him to Scotland and St. Andrews University in the early 1870s. Charles returned to the United

States with a fine education and a lifelong passion for golf. No one in the early years of golf in America had stronger opinions about courses, competition, and the meaning of the game. No one was more willing to force his opinions on anyone willing or unwilling to listen than Charles Blair Macdonald.

The years after his return from Scotland were filled with frustration. There were no courses upon which he could play. Macdonald tried for years to interest his friends in the game, with no luck. He claimed that the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 was the event that led to golf's birth in the Midwest. The fair brought many Scots and Englishmen to Chicago who wished to play golf but were frustrated by the lack of courses. Pushed by the demands of these visitors, Macdonald was persuaded to lay out a very rudimentary course on the Lake Forest estate of John B. Farwell. This experiment led to the founding of the Onwentsia Club in 1895.

The members of Macdonald's city club were also bitten by the golf bug. MacDonald claims that he actually passed the hat at the city club and thirty men contributed ten dollars toward the construction of a course. It was built on land owned by A. Haddon Smith in Belmont. Smith was from Musselburgh, arguably the birthplace of golf in Scotland. By 1893 Macdonald had produced an eighteen-hole course. That same year, Illinois chartered the Chicago Golf Club. This charter was signed by seven men, only two of whom were American citizens. By all accounts, the club was a rude affair, much like St. Andrew's of Yonkers during its early days. However, golf had taken root and the membership grew rapidly.

Always ambitious, Macdonald led the effort to find land upon which he could build a real course that would compare with the finest courses in the world. He found a two-hundred-acre parcel near Wheaton, about twenty-five miles from Chicago. In 1894, as Macdonald was crafting his course in Wheaton, golf clubs began to sprout elsewhere in the Chicago suburbs. Soon there was an impressive list: Onwentsia, Belmont, Midlothian,

Exmoor, Glenview, and Skokie. Chicago was undergoing a revolution of sorts. Its citizens were escaping the heart of the city for the suburbs, and when they arrived they built a golf club as part of the process.

A fourth golf course was founded in the mid-1890s that was very different from the courses at private clubs. In 1895 the city of New York built a course in Van Cortlandt Park, in the Bronx. Established in 1888, the park was on land that was once the estate of Oloff Van Cortlandt, a wealthy Dutchman and patriarch of an influential New York family. The course owed its existence to a group of affluent gentlemen from the Riverdale area on the Hudson River. They clearly wished to have the city build them a public course that would, in fact, be largely private. The Riverdale group formed the Mosholu Golf Club, which exercised extraordinary control over the course in the years prior to 1900.

The course was the scene of the first public golf tournament in the United States, conducted by the St. Andrew's Golf Club in Yonkers and open to players who were not members of a private club. An article in *Golfing*, in 1896, claimed that the course had as many as one hundred players on Saturday and holidays. The article also claimed that "a half dozen private clubs" made Van Cortlandt their home course. This suggests that America was adopting a pattern common in Scotland whereby clubs of golfers shared a single course. Several of these clubs lasted well into the twentieth century. But the idea that a number of private clubs could share a single public course, as they do in Scotland, never really took hold in the United States.

This pattern also evoked much criticism. By the turn of the century, the clubs like Mosholu were driven from the course, and informal private control of the links evaporated. The usefulness of this first public course was reduced by a law that required it to be closed on Sunday, the only free day for most of the players who wished to play. Yet it hung on and eventually flourished. The course was expanded to eighteen holes in 1899

by Tom Bendelow, who became the greenkeeper between 1899 and 1901. With Van Cortlandt Park as something of a model, most large American cities would eventually establish public courses as an alternative to the private clubs.

Golf first came to America, then, in the form of courses paid for or instigated by affluent men who wished to play golf. In every case there was a connection to the Old World, and to Scotland, particularly. These men also believed that an organization was needed to control the game in America. The early history of the United States Golf Association (USGA) is well known. Both St. Andrew's and the Newport Golf Club held what were billed as national amateur championships. The Newport event was held in September 1894, with twenty golfers in the field, playing a stroke-play format. Only eight men survived. William G. Lawrence defeated Charles B. Macdonald by a single stroke. Lawrence's total for thirty-six holes was 188. The quality of play was not high. Macdonald, who seemed to live his life near the boiling point, was sure that he was the best player in America and that he lost because of an improper hazard on the Newport course. His ball had come to rest near a stone wall, and the strokes required to extract it cost him the tournament.

A month later Macdonald had a second chance to prove his superiority. St. Andrew's sponsored a match-play event, and Macdonald lost again. These two controversial events were enough to get Macdonald and others thinking about establishing a national organization to conduct championships and establish rules.

Henry O. Tallmadge, a crucial figure in the organization of St. Andrew's, sent out invitations to St. Andrew's, Newport, Shinnecock Hills, The Country Club (Brookline, Massachusetts), and the Chicago Golf Club. On December 22, 1894, representatives of these clubs met over dinner at the Calumet Club in New York City. There they founded the entity that would evolve into the United States Golf Association. They elected the richest man at

the meeting, Theodore A. Havemeyer, the Sugar King, as president. Like all such organizations, they created committees and set out to write a constitution and by-laws.

It is too simple to think that the USGA came into existence because Charles B. Macdonald wanted national championships he could win. Joseph Lee, in his book *Golf in America*, gives us a hint about what was actually at stake. He admits that the USGA was founded in part to end the confusion about national championships. However, he goes on to quote approvingly the English magazine *Golf* on the value of what the Americans had done. The English journal thought that the Americans had

unerringly . . . diagnosed the weak spot in the government of golf. They have seen that golf . . . is an unwieldy, incohesive congeries of clubs without any central guidance. Everything in golf is haphazard and capricious. The rules have been altered and remodeled, not to suit the average convenience of the greatest number, but to suit the playing exigencies of one green.

Indeed, the USGA was designed to provide order and discipline for a sport that could easily have become chaotic, with individual clubs or local organizations each pursuing their own idea of what golf should be. This was most clearly evident in the voting rules established by the USGA. The constitution created two classes of member clubs—“associated” and “allied.” Associated, or full membership, was granted only to courses and clubs that were “representative.” Clubs were admitted to this full membership only by a four-fifths vote of the executive committee. This provision gave the full members absolute control over which sorts of clubs could have real power in the organization. Allied clubs had little power and few rights beyond the right to pay dues and to call themselves a USGA member.

Charles B. Macdonald suggested what lay behind this division of clubs into associated and allied. He stated, “I firmly believe the ruling of any sport by an intelligent autocratic body is infinitely preferable to mob rule, which always lowers the

morale of games.” This kept clubs with “courses laid out in any old place” or “hotel courses” from having a voice in the future of the game. This voting arrangement was hotly debated over the next thirty years (especially in 1905) but it was not changed until 1927.

The USGA, with a few elite clubs firmly in control, set about to establish key definitions central to golf competition. Many thought that the most crucial job was to define the term “amateur golfer.” This issue bedeviled the USGA for years. The men who controlled the organization into the 1920s sought to eliminate commercialism, the taint of money, from the concept of amateur. Anyone who had played for money, had given lessons or demonstrations of golf, had caddied after age fifteen, or had designed, administered, or built a golf course was banned from amateur competitions. As established in 1897, the definition of amateur also excluded anyone who “played the game or frequents golf courses for the purpose of exploiting his business.” The USGA made member clubs the agents in charge of keeping nonamateurs out of its competitions. All entrants in USGA-sanctioned events needed a document from a club secretary vouching for the fact that the player was a member of an approved club and an amateur according to the USGA definition.

It is easy to view the USGA in its early days as solely a small group of elitists attempting to control the game and limit play to the wealthy and socially prominent, but this would not be accurate. From the start, there was a struggle for the heart of the organization between an aristocratic and a democratic impulse. This struggle has continued to this day without a convincing resolution.

In fact it was the richest and most prominent figure in the early days of the USGA who gave voice to the democratic, austere, egalitarian point of view. Theodore Havemeyer, who made a fortune monopolizing sugar, thought golf could be a sport for the people. The USGA created a magazine called *Golfing*, and

it took up Havemeyer's ideas about the game. In a series of unsigned editorials it praised Havemeyer's view that people were spending too much on clubhouses and not enough on courses. The magazine claimed that golf could be relatively inexpensive, just as it was in Canada and Great Britain.

The USGA and Havemeyer, again in the pages of *Golfing*, were in favor of public courses. It stated that "those who wish to keep the game as the exclusive property of the wealthy who belong to clubs are not carrying out the ancient and honored traditions. In the old country, it is possible for everyone to play and no one has ever objected to this." *Golfing* also crusaded against the ban on Sunday play. It argued that golf was not a disorderly game and that average working people, who had only Sunday free from work, should be able to use the day for golf if they wished. In taking this position, the USGA faced off against powerful conservative, Christian forces that fought to keep Sundays free of all play.

Havemeyer's egalitarian tendencies had their truest test at the 1896 USGA Open Championship held at Shinnecock Hills. The U.S. Amateur Championship was also held there and went off smoothly. The Open Championship, even before it began, was enveloped in controversy. The problem was the entries of John Shippen and Oscar Bunn. Shippen was the son of an African American minister who had come to the area from Jamaica. Bunn was a Native American, about whom little is known. Both had been caddies at the club and had learned to play. Willie Dunn, the club's pro, had given them both lessons, but Shippen was the most promising of the two. Dunn allowed him to give lessons and made him an assistant. Apparently some members urged both men to enter the Open in 1896.

When the other professionals arrived they met and threatened a boycott if Shippen and Bunn were allowed to play. Havemeyer's response was quick and sure. He told the pros that the event would be played with or without them. There remains

much doubt about what was said but Shippen and Bunn competed. Shippen played very well. The event was thirty-six holes of medal play; Shippen played the morning round with none other than Charles B. MacDonald and Shippen's seventy-eight had him tied for the lead. Shippen's chance for victory was crushed when, in the second round, he took an eleven on the thirteenth hole. He finished seven shots behind James Foulis, the eventual winner. Shippen played occasionally in Open Championships after 1896. His last appearance was in 1913. Shippen, however, made one other appearance on the golf record. On September 29, 1897, he played an exhibition against Valentine Fitzjohn, a "Scotch professional." Shippen, in the *New York Times* report, was referred to as the "colored lad." The contest was held at the Ardsley Club; Fitzjohn won easily.

By 1896 golf had come a long way since the game arrived as an infant in an apple orchard in Yonkers. Something like a community had clearly appeared. There were citizens, mostly members of approximately seventy-five private clubs. Of these clubs, forty-three were allied or associate members of the USGA. This list of clubs suggested how localized golf was in 1896. Of the fifteen associate clubs, twelve were in New York, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, or New Jersey. Only two—the Chicago Golf Club and the Washington DC Golf Club—were outside the Northeast. Of the twenty-eight allied clubs, twenty-three were in New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Connecticut, or Rhode Island. New York possessed seventeen member clubs, the most of any state. Only three clubs were located in the South—one each in South Carolina, Maryland, and Washington DC.

A political organization had appeared. The USGA sought to take control of the game in America. Essentially an organization of clubs, the USGA established hierarchies of several sorts. Clubs themselves were arranged according to their "worth" and reputation. Amateur players were defined and set off against professionals. Officials of the USGA began to discuss what was



proper and improper when it came to golf. An endeavor that would grow as the years passed.

The USGA had a small part in developing the means whereby golfers could learn more about the game they had embraced. The USGA founded a journal called *Golfing* to communicate news and information about the game. Its central function was to publish actions by the organization and to establish the USGA as the voice of golf.

In 1895 a magazine called *The Golfer* also offered itself to American golfers. In a “Publisher’s Statement,” *The Golfer* (November 1895) made it clear that it sought an elite audience anxious to do things correctly: “Golf is the greatest game of this country. It is the leading game of high social life; it is at once picturesque and scientific. Form is essential, costumes and equipment require the closest attention possible. *The Golfer* meets the call for an authority on the game and correct form.”

The existence of an evolving golf community was clearly evident in these pre-1900 golf journals. Beyond telling readers how to swing a club, these periodicals also told their readers what to wear and how to act properly on the course. Furthermore, if one examines the advertisements in these early magazines, one finds an amazing array of enterprises seeking to do business in some way with golfers. Among the advertisers were sellers of golf clothing, makers of clubs and balls, printers of club books, financiers looking to lend to new clubs, real estate agents with properties to rent on golf courses, publishers with instructional books, and trophy makers.

In 1898 *Golf* began to publish a “Wanted” section where people looking for work in the golf business could make their availability known. It contained notices from professionals, caddies, and club stewards looking for a position. There were a number of ads placed by professionals who were looking to hire club makers. The magazine also published an ad for a “Golf Information Bureau” that supplied free information about golf at hotels, arranged golf tours in Europe and America, and

claimed to “have special information respecting the state of greens.”

In less than a decade, golf in America had become a significant part of the American landscape. Why did it take root so quickly and firmly? There were grumblings that it was just a fad and that it would burn itself out. By 1900 it was clear that golf was no fad.

For some modern-day commentators, the reasons behind golf’s rapid rise are clear. They define golf as an elite sport, a game for the rich, and see its adoption as one way the wealthy could maintain their status atop the American social structure. Donald J. Mrozek, for example, states that

by the very sporting ventures they chose, the American rich set patterns of behavior that distinguished them from the masses and even from much of the respectable middle class. Infected with a desire to set fashion and keep pace with its mercurial changes, the wealthy elite often opted for customs of the British upper classes—a phenomenon that showed itself in the sudden vogue of tennis and golf and invited satire in the rise of fox-hunting.

More simply, Kenneth T. Jackson, in his study of American suburbs, contends that golf has been the “aristocratic pastime *par excellence*.” Such views have some truth to them, but, for the most part, they miss the complex reality that actually explains the adoption of golf in America.

In the first place, golf cannot be lumped together with yachting, polo, or foxhunting. Also, the idea that the American rich were copying the habits of the British upper crust is similarly off base. Golf came to America as a Scottish sport that had only recently been adopted in England. For the vast majority, golf was democratic and egalitarian. American commentators repeatedly made the point that golf reflected what they saw as the Scottish character, and this character was democratic, simple, and austere. A point never made about yachting, foxhunting, or polo.

It is obvious that affluent Americans took up golf for reasons that extended well beyond a desire to maintain their class status. It is also obvious that, by 1900, there was a conflict between the desire of some Americans to make golf solely a game for the elite and the game's tradition of egalitarianism and accessibility—a conflict that continues to define the game to this day.

The adoption of golf was not solely the product of class feeling or status anxiety among the rich. Its adoption was contingent upon a cluster of developments that made golf attractive to many Americans. They turned to golf and made a sizable investment privately, publicly, financially, and emotionally because a number of factors came together to make golf something Americans wished to make a part of their lives.

The first of these factors was technology. A number of prosaic technological developments made golf more attractive or made it possible for more people to play. Certainly golf would have made little headway in America if not for the introduction in Great Britain of the gutta-percha ball in 1848. Prior to that date golfers in Great Britain played with balls called *featheries*. These objects were constructed from two small pieces of leather stitched together much like a tiny baseball. However, the process was somewhat more complex than the making of a baseball. For one thing a small hole was necessary through which the maker stuffed wet feathers using great force to create a hard sphere that would compress and stay round. Makers also used the hole to turn the leather inside out so the raised stitches would end up on the inside.

Featheries were expensive. They did not fly as far as the new gutta-percha balls and they became out of round more easily and flew in unpredictable directions. They also took on moisture and became soggy. One hit with the edge of an iron club simply ruined the thing.

Gutta-percha was a natural product of several types of tropical trees. It is a milky latex sap that was first used for insulating cables and waterproofing. Whoever discovered that it could be

used as a golf ball remains unknown. The new-style ball flew erratically until makers discovered that markings gouged into the surface made them fly straighter. Between 1848 and the 1880s the markings were applied by hand, and after that molds were used.

The “guttie” changed the game dramatically. They were cheaper and virtually indestructible. In very cold conditions, however, they could dramatically shatter. Its introduction clearly set off a golf boom in Scotland and England—a boom that Americans saw when they traveled to Great Britain. Of course, the “guttie” was replaced by the rubber-cored or Haskell ball, just after 1900. In short, advances in the nature of the ball made the game more fun and much cheaper. Robert Browning, the golf historian, has concluded that the dramatic evolution of the ball between 1850 and 1900 “made golf a different game,” especially for older players, women, and children, who lacked the strength to muscle a feathery around the course. The rapid changes in the ball made the game easier for more players; it made it more inclusive.

Other technological advances helped golf take root. The construction of urban railroads and electric trolleys in most large urban areas made getting to the newly built courses possible. It also allowed many to escape the city and set up a new kind of life in the suburbs. Very often golf clubs had their own stations where transportation to the clubhouse was available. Of course, this was only a small step in the history of mobility. By the mid-1920s, the automobile would do much more to bring the rural golf club within easy reach.

Increased mobility was both cause and effect in the rise of suburbs. Certainly suburbanization preceded golf in America, but the suburb and golf were a virtually perfect match. As Americans rode the trains and trolleys into the suburbs, they left behind the social institutions of the central city. Golf and the golf club were perfect answers to this problem. They replaced in part the city club, the saloon, and the ladies group.

Golf, and particularly the golf club, was the answer to the new suburbanite's persistent question: Will we have a social life out here?

In equally important ways, golf was a response to growing anti-urban and anti-immigrant sentiment. In simple terms, American cities at the end of the nineteenth century were becoming unlivable for many. People remembered the preindustrial city with a certain nostalgia. There was a sense that something important had been lost. This reaction was not solely rooted in the Northeast—it was general. Booth Tarkington, in *The Turmoil* (1915), could write about Indianapolis in clearly nostalgic terms:

Not quite so long ago as a generation, there was no panting giant here, no heaving, grimy city; there was but a pleasant big town of neighborly people who had an understanding of one another, being, on the whole, much of the same type. It was a leisurely and kindly place—“homelike,” it was called. The good burgers were given to jogging comfortably about in phaetons or in surreys for a family drive on Sunday. No one was very rich; few were very poor; the air was clean, and there was time to live.

Is it any wonder that people who shared this sentiment found in the suburban golf club a solution to their anxiety about the transformation of American cities? It was crucial that Tarkington's image of the old city was populated by people “on the whole, much of the same type,” for it was immigration as much as industry that changed the cities. In virtually every city, a massive tide of newcomers from new places was a compelling reality. In the 1880s approximately five million immigrants came to the United States, about twice the number seen in any prior decade. There were “new” immigrants who came from eastern and southern Europe—not northern and western Europe, where previous arrivals had originated. The number of Jews coming to America soared. Many cities, by 1890, had populations that included between 30 and 40 percent foreign-born residents.

And the rush of new immigrants was only part of the problem. Between 1850 and 1900, cities like Boston had become divided. There were a few expensive homes in the Back Bay, but for the most part, the inner city was dominated by work places and low-income housing. In contrast, there was an outer city of middle- and upper-income homes. People in these homes traveled to and from the inner city on a newly built street-railway system. This outer city was the product of economic prosperity and the desire of affluent Boston families to live in safer, cleaner, and more natural places.

The division of cities like Boston into inner and outer cities spawned the rise of the problems we still associate with modern urban life. House buyers flooded into the suburbs. Their sudden departure from the inner city destroyed old neighborhoods. Sam Bass Warner Jr., in his book on the Boston suburbs, summarized the outcome: “With the new metropolis and all its changes the ancient problems of large cities once more came to life: the individual members of urban society became isolated within a physical and social network which had passed their comprehension and control.”

In these circumstances, two compelling desires drove those who had the means to leave the inner city. The first was a desire to escape a situation beyond “their comprehension and control.” The second was to form associations that would re-create a sense of community. The end of the nineteenth century saw Americans literally go nuts over associations. Sport was a fertile area for association. Existing organizations like the YMCA and YWCA turned to sport and exercise as a new central focus of their endeavors. Almost every sport rode this tide of organization. With community of the older sort—the kind that Tarkington thought had once existed in Indianapolis—in shreds, people sought to rebuild it around sport. Certainly this desire for community was crucial in the rise of spectator sports in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Commitment, even passion, for the town team brought people together.

Golf, as a sport, was in many ways a perfect solution to the desire for reconstituted community. It seemed to *require* that you form a club. It came with an exotic language that, once learned, gave the faithful a sense of belonging. It had an ancient tradition that created the sense that you were joining a community deeply rooted in the past.

But for golf to thrive, for it to be accepted at all, two final and related historical developments had to occur. The first was the rise in both discretionary time and money. Tracing the growth of discretionary or free time is difficult because it increased at different rates for the various classes and occupations. But the six-day workweek was, in the 1890s, reduced by the arrival from Great Britain of the idea that Saturday should be only a half workday. The five-and-a-half-day workweek became particularly common during the summer months. This was the beginning of the modern weekend. The forty-hour week would not become standard until the 1930s, but the direction was set before the turn of the century. This was one of the factors that profoundly shaped modern existence. The hours worked fell in the last century by 50 percent, while productivity soared.

This productivity translated into more money for personal consumption, money that went to things beyond food and housing. In 1900, one hour of work produced fifty cents for personal consumption (adjusted to 1982 prices). In 1990, the same hour produced \$9.75 in personal consumption. Of course, people used this income for essential improvements. They purchased better food, indoor plumbing, hot water, electricity, medical care, and bigger, safer homes. However, there was considerable money left over to sweeten life. Recreation or play was one way to spend this money.

The other historical development contributing to the acceptance of golf involved the changing American attitude toward the pursuit of leisure activities. Slowly, over the last century, the attitude toward play began to change as discretionary time and income increased. There was no official American attitude

toward play prior to 1890, but prior to the Civil War, it is hard to find an advocate of unproductive play. Indeed, work and plenty of it was deemed the moral core of life. Recreation or play was only useful as a refresher, as something that allowed you to return to work, even more dedicated to labor. Golf in its first two decades in America benefited greatly from this idea. Golf was celebrated as the perfect antidote to overwork. H. C. Chatfield-Taylor testified “that the businessmen of the Middle West are no longer shallow dyspeptics who toil from 8 A.M. to 6 P.M. Golf has made their blood flow and color come to the cheeks.”

What does he mean when he uses the term *businessman*? Surely he does not mean the super rich. In almost all the discussions of golf that appeared in America prior to 1910, it is very difficult to find a connection between the very wealthy and golf. It was not their sport. It was not yachting or polo. Yet clearly, it was not pictured as a sport for the poor. Golf was adopted and promoted by a class of men and women that is hard to name. Upper middle class will have to do. It was a class dominated by middle-level businessmen who worked hard and moved to the new suburbs financed by their modest but growing success. Once there they sought a diversion. Gustav Kobbe, in 1901, described what happened:

To live in the country once simply meant to sleep there. The balance of the suburban resident's existence was divided between express trains and the city. But with the introduction of sport as a feature of country life—and especially of that sensible, democratic, and reasonable economical sport, golf—and the general adoption of the Saturday half-holiday it is remarkable how much time the country resident can give to healthful outdoor exercise and social recreation. The Nation is beginning to find as much fascination in driving a golf ball as in driving a bargain.