

Could a Golf Course Save The Village?

A story of vision in desperate times.

For most folks in Elk Rapids, October 17, 2012 seemed like any other mid autumn weekday—nothing really out of the ordinary. They went about their business that day pretty much as usual; working, perhaps raking leaves or putting away their boats or patio furniture, arguing over political issues in this election year—the usual stuff. Very few people in the Village were aware of the significance of October 17th in the history of Elk Rapids, what happened on this day 90 years ago and how important it was to the survival of the village of Elk Rapids.

To fully appreciate the significance of what happened here on October 17, 1922, we have to venture back a little further, to the year 1913. On September 19, 1913 three men, Harry Vardon, Ted Ray and Francis Ouimet had completed regulation play in the United States Open golf championship in a tie.

In 1913 golf was a game played in only a few places in America, principally the northeastern U.S. Only a mere handful of golf courses existed in America at that time. The U.S. Open had been played in America since 1900, but no native born American had ever won the event. The general public in America cared very little about the game.

Harry Vardon was a vaunted British golf professional, winner of multiple British Open golf championships and was considered by most observers as the best golfer in the world at that time. Though not quite as successful as Vardon, Ted Ray was also an accomplished British professional, reigning British Open champion and winner of numerous tournaments in Great Britain and Ireland. By contrast, Francis Ouimet was a 20 year old American amateur barely out of high school, who lived across the street from The Country Club of Brookline (a suburb of Boston, Mass.), site of the 1913 U.S. Open. He had often earned spending money serving as a caddy for Brookline members. The fact that Vardon and Ray were tied for the lead in the U.S. Open was hardly news—but Ouimet's success was extraordinary.

A playoff for the U.S. Open championship took place the next day, September 20th and the impossible happened. Francis Ouimet defeated Vardon and Ray to become the U.S. Open champion. An amateur and natural born American had won! The news of his victory so captivated the public, that interest in golf exploded and spread across the country like wildfire. Cities and towns in many parts of America scrambled to build golf courses.

At the same time, economic circumstances locally made the prospect of Elk Rapids joining this trend any time soon extremely unlikely. As most know, the Village had boomed around the turn of the 20th century. The Dexter/Noble companies manufactured iron and chemicals, the area sported a thriving logging business and the population in Elk Rapids had grown fast and large. But by 1913, the manufacturing and logging businesses

had started to decline and over the next several years things began to look desperate for Elk Rapids.

As the Grand Rapids Press reported, “The village of Elk Rapids was born of the lumber boom and prospered; had its industrial era, its iron and chemical mills. One day the mills closed down...grass grew over the tracks which carried the iron ore; panes fell out of the old windows, homes were vacated as workers moved to points of labor demand; and presently Elk Rapids was known as “the deserted village”.”

It is difficult to imagine a situation as dire as the one the village of Elk Rapids now faced. Yet the Grand Rapids Press further reported, “For all that, some stayed on. There was nothing to Elk Rapids...but the courage that lived in the breasts of the faithful...”. The citizens who remained here had dug in. One of the first steps they took on the road back came with the forming of an organization named the Elk Rapids Resort and Industrial Association—a predecessor of sorts to a Chamber of Commerce. Mr. Charles B. Carver was named its President.

Meanwhile on June 23, 1921 it was reported that a Mr. and Mrs. Smith had recently purchased the Gumbert farm, with its 3,000 feet of shore frontage on Elk Lake in east Elk Rapids. Mr. Smith decided to move the 10 cows he had grazing on the property to his dairy farm and attempt to sell the Gumbert farm for resort property—perhaps for a golf course, tennis courts or other improvements. His decision received little notice. His timing was fortuitous.

On September 22, 1921, the Elk Rapids Resort and Industrial Association held a meeting at the village Opera House with President Carver presiding. There had been rumors that a movement was afoot that could lead to the establishment of a golf course in the Village.

At the meeting Mr. C.H. King of Rex Terrace gave what was called a “splendid talk” regarding what could be done to attract visitors to our area and urging those present of the need for community harmony and co-operation in this effort. It was clear that the aim of the Elk Rapids Resort and Industrial Association was to redevelop Elk Rapids into a tourist mecca and building a golf course was central to their plans.

The ERRIA and President Carver intended to press these issues forward, to arouse a spirit of enthusiasm in the community over the winter of 1921/22. The prospects for a golf course looked promising and they felt there was no denying the fact that well developed resort facilities would bring greater returns to everyone in the Village. The ERRIA felt Elk Rapids best hope for the future was to capitalize on its resort potential and to do so aggressively. In light of the recent community debates over the Dam Beach and Bech Mustard building redevelopment projects, one can only wonder what significant hurdles the ERRIA faced in selling the community on their plans to save Elk Rapids by building a golf course!

In July of 1922, the Village pondered its options, among them to convert old industrial properties into a park. The Elk Rapids Iron Company had offered the Village a 5 acre

parcel of land to be used for a free camping site, while at the same time the push for a golf course continued. Then at a August 10, 1922 town council meeting a petition was presented. The petition called for a special election for a \$9,000 bond to be used for park purposes, which would include a golf course. The petition was backed by 139 signers.

On September 28, 1922, an editorial in the Grand Rapids Press reported the news; “The village of Elk Rapids, which lost nearly two-thirds of its population between the years of 1910 and 1920, has just bonded for a new park on which is to be constructed a municipal golf course. The Press thinks this is the most significant item of the week’s news in Western Michigan. The era of automobiles has brought Michigan good roads and these in turn a tremendous tourist business. Elk Rapids on the path of this new boom, has reached out for its opportunity. This week it went one ahead of the rest of the state by voting for a village golf links, sure to attract resorters to the vicinity.”

The people of Elk Rapids had taken a bold step, voting in favor of the bond proposal to build a golf park. It seemed the village of Elk Rapids would at last catch up with the national golf craze started by Francis Ouimet’s stunning U.S. Open victory in 1913, and take a giant step forward in the vision of the ERRIA to reinvent Elk Rapids as a tourist destination. Plans began to move forward quickly, as important decisions had to be made. Who would design and build the course and where would it be located.

One of the most prominent—if not THE most prominent golf course designers of the day was Dornoch, Scotland native Donald Ross. Mr. Ross had benefited greatly from the golf boom in the United States since 1913 and would go on to build some of the most famous courses in America during his distinguished career. Among them is the much heralded Pinehurst #2 in North Carolina and the equally renowned south course at Oakland Hills in the Detroit area, which he completed in the early 1920’s. Given the enormity of the effort in getting the golf course project approved, this was no time half measures. Elk Rapids hired Donald Ross to design and build the Elk Rapids golf course.

Next on the agenda was where to build the course. Mr. Ross’ design associate, J.B. McGovern was dispatched to the area to scout out the best available location for the course. On October 11, 1922 Mr. McGovern reported the following to the golf course committee. “After having examined two parcels of land within the corporate limits of Elk Rapids, and also having looked over some land within the township limits, I am convinced that the Gumbert farm is the most suitable for a nine hole golf course. While the topography is in a sense very flat, I am sure that a nine hole course built according to the plans will be a pleasure to play on.”

Mr. and Mrs. Smith must have been very pleased with their decision to move the dairy cows off the Gumbert farm!

Six days later—October 17, 1922—the big day arrived. With the bond issue passed, a course designer hired and a location for the course secured, The Elk Rapids Golf Club was officially founded.

The first step in the vision of the concerned citizens of Elk Rapids to save their village had been realized. Over the next 90 years the fortunes of both the Village and the golf course would have their ups and downs, but one thing is certain—they endured them and prevailed. The Elk Rapids Golf Club and the village of Elk Rapids are inexorably joined, one with the other. The course stands as a monument to the business people and concerned citizens of this community who chose to take a significant risk in order to save their village. Their road to success began on October 17, 1922.

EPILOGUE

The surveyor's blue prints of the Donald Ross design for the Elk Rapids Golf Club were received on November 9, 1922. Construction of the course began on May 10, 1923. In those days golf course designers moved very little earth for the building of a golf course, using the natural lay of the land without significant mechanical alteration, so the project moved along at a brisk pace.

By July 1923, significant progress had been made and the course was beginning to take shape. It appeared that the Elk Rapids Golf Club would very likely to be ready for play in the summer of 1924.

JULY 1924—THE GOLF CLUB OPENS FOR PLAY

On July 17, 1924 the local newspaper reported, "One of the greatest holidays Elk Rapids has ever experienced was Tuesday afternoon of this week, when the Golf Park was ceremoniously opened in Elk Rapids. The day was perfect, with the sun shining brightly but not too warmly and a few gathering clouds from the southwest held off their moisture until about four-thirty."

On that beautiful summer day, men in collared shirts and ties and ladies in flowing dresses and wide brimmed hats played golf for the first time on the newest creation of Donald Ross—The Elk Rapids Golf Club.