

History of the Oak Ridge Country Club, Part 1

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on January 5, 2010)

Another of the historic organizations and locations in Oak Ridge is the Oak Ridge Country Club golf course and clubhouse located at 150 Gum Hollow Road just south of the west end of the Oak Ridge Turnpike. The well established golf course lays just southeast of the Guardhouse for the K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Plant that was built in 1948 to isolate the plant site from the town that was being opened to the public on March 19, 1949.

The golf course was started the year before the guardhouse was built. It was provided by the Atomic Energy Commission as one of the first actions to help normalize the town of Oak Ridge after the Army's Manhattan Project's Clinton Engineer District was turned over officially to the AEC on January 1, 1947.

I am grateful to Dub Shults for bringing this story to me. It is one I think you readers will enjoy and many of you will fondly recall some of the events mentioned in the history. Many of you may even recall other bits of history associated with the club over the years.

For example, do you recall some of the celebrities who have visited Oak Ridge to play golf at the Oak Ridge Country Club over the years? How about Patty Berg on March 17, 1955? I doubt that many of us recall that visit! What about Mickey Mantle? Do you recall his visit? Professional golfer R. E. "Rabbit" Grove commented that Mantle was the longest hitter he had ever seen. Grove said, "He drove with a #4 wood from the Driving Range back tee and lost the ball in the woods."

Of course, the most famous visit may well have been that of Arnold Palmer on July 30, 1966. There have been many highlights over the years, with visiting celebrities being only one of the many memorable events for the club members and Oak Ridge residents.

I hope you enjoy the following history provided by Dub Shults, Ward Foster and George Courville.

"It was April, 1947. Oak Ridge had contributed directly to the end of World War II and was becoming heavily involved in national atomic energy programs. The Atomic Energy Commission, in the midst of allocating property that would enhance recreational opportunities in the city, made six hundred acres available for golf...if a suitable proposal was received. Only one proposal was submitted for that land at first and it was unacceptable. So, the story begins.

"Two men, Walter Rogers and Clark Kaskie, decided to go after that land. They called a meeting for interested parties at the Recreation Hall in the center of Oak Ridge. The turnout was great and it resulted in a "plan" for building a golf course on the west end of Oak Ridge. This generated interest among many others, one of whom was a K-25 engineer named Bob Dustin. He was not an avid golfer, but he was excited by the opportunity to design a golf course...and he did. Within a few weeks, he had studied the topography of the land and developed a layout for an eighteen-hole course.

"The plan called for teams of 15-20 volunteers assigned to work on each hole. These workers had the option of working 50 hours on their assigned hole or paying \$50. Altogether there were some 200 workers, including scientists, engineers, craftsmen, professionals, and others. They brought their own tools, rakes, mattocks, shovels, saws, and hands, and went to work clearing land and throwing seed.

"By July, the work was well underway and by October, nine holes were completed with temporary greens and tees and "cow pasture" fairways. An opening day exhibition was held that very month.

"A sketch of the original nine-hole layout, taken from the club's archives, shows that Hole No.1 laid approximately where today's Hole No. 6 is located. Total yardage was 3,418 yards and the feature hole was a 620-yard par 5.

"A second nine was built over the next two years, this time using motorized equipment "borrowed" from one of the AEC installations (I'll bet there is more to this story – Ray). By October, 1949, all eighteen

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holes were in use. The 6,229-yard layout was described in the local newspaper at the time. The two nines were reversed several years later.

"A golf professional was hired and a volunteer greens keeper was recruited. An organization for the club was developed with A. J. Kessing as the first president. Gentry Underwood and Doug Lavers, the Y-12 Plant Manager, were Board members. Dues were \$6 per month!

"Meanwhile, another group of volunteers acquired a building — formerly a dispensary — from K-25, moved it down the Turnpike to the club property, and converted it into a clubhouse. It soon became adequate for the time with locker rooms, a card room, a dining room, a bar, etc.

"The original bar served for many years, even in the 19th Hole of the succeeding clubhouse. Roane County was dry at that time and slot machines were illegal, but that didn't stop us...we had an arrangement with a local bootlegger who provided the club with both booze and slot machines.

"Of course, the club was "raided" every three months or so, but somehow we knew when the raiders were coming and hence had time to move the good stuff and machines to some distant place, like the woods around No. 13 green. The club flourished during those early years, largely because it was one of the very few places in town to get a drink in a club-like atmosphere.

Next we will conclude the history of the Oak Ridge Country Club and see what happened as a result of the decision to "borrow" some of the government equipment to build the second nine-hole course. You might guess that was not something that could be allowed to go without being addressed.

I understand from my research into the history of the early managers of the AEC sites in Oak Ridge that at least one of the managers may well have had to leave Oak Ridge because of allowing this government equipment to be used in this manner. As is normally the case, there may be more to this story than first meets the eye.



Arnold Palmer visits Oak Ridge Country club on July 30, 1966

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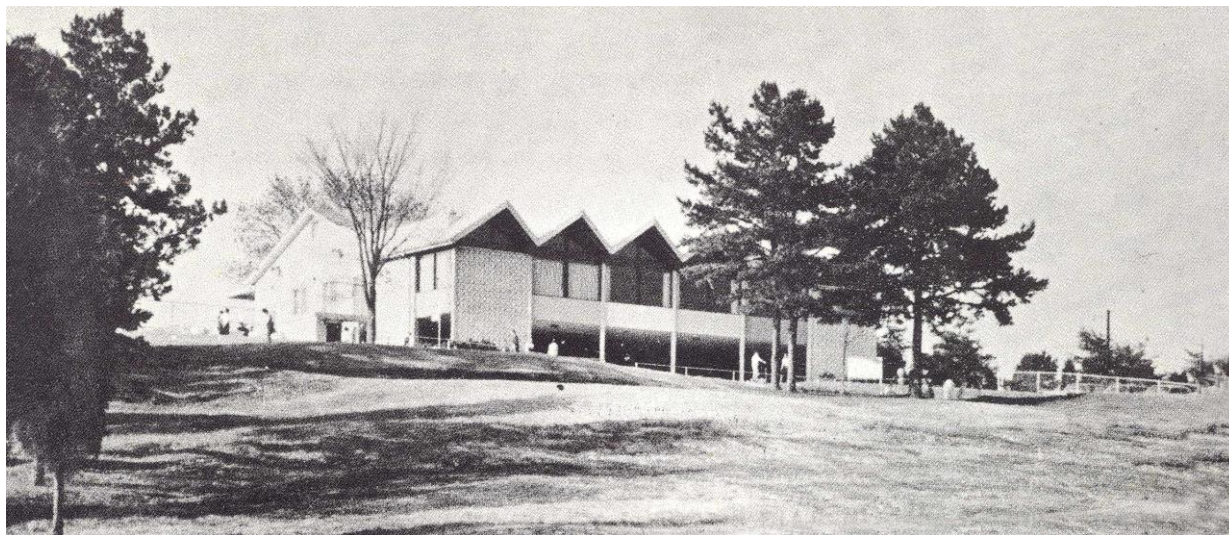
Mickey Mantle and Oak Ridge Country Club Pro R. E. "Rabbit" Grove



Patty Berg, March 17, 1955, then a top woman professional, was the first touring professional golfer to appear at the Oak Ridge Country Club

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View of Oak Ridge Country Club as it looked in July of 1967



Clubhouse as it looks today