COURSE WORK BY TOM DOAK



Name Recognition

Honoring the less-sung architects of the Golden Age

There aren't many golf courses from the 1970s in the top-100 lists today, and that's probably because hardly anyone back then had learned from the history of the craft. As a thirteen-year-old, I knew A.W. Tillinghast's name because he'd designed Winged Foot, which was hosting the 1974 U.S. Open, but when Frank Hannigan wrote a profile of Tillie that year in the USGA's *Golf Journal*, he treated him as a forgotten man.

That was par for the course in the 1970s. Robert Trent Jones was the only household name in golf course architecture back then, and he didn't mind that a bit, so he didn't write about the giants who came before him. Most people thought Augusta National was a Bobby Jones design, and Jack Neville, who had a hand in just a couple of courses (one of which was Pebble Beach), was just as well known as Donald Ross, who built 400, but was only known back then for Pinehurst.

I want to shine some of that **Golden Age limelight** on the **less-known great designers** of the Met Area so we can appreciate them and learn from what they did so well.

It wasn't until Jack Nicklaus and Arnold Palmer started getting into design, in the mid to late part of the decade, that older clubs started to pay attention to who had designed their courses. Oh, it was A. W. Tillinghast, you say? Who was he? And thus began the fascination with Golden Age golf architects we see today.

The problem with this is that we're writing our history 60–100 years after the fact. Important figures are omitted, and others' influence exaggerated from the way it really was. The four "Mount Rushmore" faces of American golf course design (C.B. Macdonald, Alister MacKenzie, Donald Ross, and A.W. Tillinghast) came to the forefront not so much because they had done a lot of fine courses, but because their names were attached to the tournament venues of the era – Augusta National, Oak Hill and Oakland Hills and Pinehurst #2, Winged Foot and Baltusrol.

Had Shinnecock Hills been in the U.S. Open rota back then, perhaps William Flynn's face would be on Mount Rushmore – or maybe the credit would have been given to Willie Dunn, even though virtually none of his design remains. Indeed, Hugh Wilson and George Crump and Bill Fownes and Jack Neville's names are widely familiar to many people interested in architecture, because of their involvement respectively with Merion, Pine Valley, Oakmont and Pebble Beach – even though the four men didn't build ten courses among them.

Brand recognition has possibly had even more impact on people's opinions of older courses than of new ones. Over time, as the famous few architects became better known, the effect on golf course rankings reinforced their stranglehold on everyone's attention. Somerset Hills was once deemed too short to merit attention for the top-100 lists, but oh, it's a Tillinghast? Now it's in the top 50. And if Ross built a course, it must be worth restoring. Meanwhile, other fine courses that weren't designed by the famous few slip even further into anonymity.

So I thought I might make my next few columns about some of the architects whose work has been left behind, and give them a little of the credit they deserve. The Met Area was one of the early proving grounds for golf course architects, and there are a handful of locals who were responsible for the majority of the older courses that survive to this day. Taken alphabetically, they include:

Charles Banks, a disciple of C.B. Macdonald and Seth Raynor, who completed Raynor's work after his untimely death in 1926 and then designed courses on his own, including Forsgate, The Knoll, Essex County, Tamarack, and Whippoorwill;

Devereux Emmet, the wealthy pioneer and friend of Macdonald who designed the Island Golf Links - forerunner to today's Garden City Golf Club - and went on to design more than 170 courses, with the great bulk of his work on Long Island, in Westchester County, and up the Hudson Valley;

Willie Park, Jr., the transplanted Scotsman who based himself in New York when he came to the States to practice golf architecture full time in 1916, and completed his masterpiece at Maidstone just before his death in 1925;

Herbert Strong, the former club professional at Royal St. George's in England, who emigrated to take the professional's job at Apawamis in 1905, and designed several prominent tournament sites in the early 1900's, including Inwood, Engineers, and Canterbury in Ohio;

Championship venues bring brand-name recognition, but **the main job is to provide an enjoyable challenge** day in and day out.

Walter Travis, the outstanding amateur player of the first decade of the 20th century, who turned his hand to the renovation of his home club at Garden City, and went on to design courses all up and down the eastern seaboard.

If my unsung heroes needed a sixth man, they could lean heavily on C.H. (Hugh) Alison, the former Oxford golfer, who as partner to the English design pioneer Harry Colt came to America in 1920 and pursued all of the firm's work over here, including Canoe Brook, Century, Fresh Meadow, and Timber Point in the Met Area. While his efforts here are not as highly acclaimed as his work for the CC of Detroit, Milwaukee CC, Burning Tree in D.C., or Hirono and Kawana in Japan, Timber Point was heralded as one of the great courses in the country before it went bankrupt and had to be taken over by Suffolk County, which broke it up into three nines. It's the one course in America I would most like to restore (I'll have more to say about that in the future).

Not all great courses survive; they can pass out of existence for a number of reasons, most of them economic. But unsatisfying courses don't survive, and the architects who laid out grounds that have delivered satisfaction for a century or so did something special. Championship venues bring brand-name recognition, but the main job is to provide an enjoyable challenge day in and day out. In the months to come I want to shine some of that Golden Age limelight on the less-known great designers of the Met Area so we can appreciate them and learn from what they did so well. ■

