

April 21, 2021

SHERIDAN PARK GOLF CLUB THE HISTORY OF SHERIDAN PARK GOLF COURSE



The History of the Sheridan Park Golf Course

By: James W Pellow

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The establishment of Sheridan Park in 1926 (which will be more fully covered in a future post) would occur as a spectacular wave of land speculation struck the Town and resulted in a massive expenditure for infrastructure as well as projects such as the million dollar expenditure for the 185 acre park itself. The lack of actual subsequent residential and commercial development, however, to pay for these tremendous outlays would drag the Town into insolvency even before the Great Depression had begun in August of 1929. Nevertheless, the new Sheridan Park was considered a source of local pride. The most beautiful area of the Town's terrain would be preserved for recreational use as the surrounding areas were rapidly being transformed into subdivisions for lot sales. This terrain included a twelve acre lake and a wide clear creek which ran through small ravines and groves of mature trees.

Yet by the early 1930's the primary purpose of the Park would already come into question as the terrain was seen as an ideal location for an activity which was going mainstream in America. That activity was the game of golf, and golf courses were beginning to be constructed throughout Western New York in greater and greater numbers. Local proponents would thus work hard to bring a golf course to the Town. The biggest of whom was influential Kenmore resident, Louis Dietshler, who called a meeting to gather support on 16 February, 1932 in the Kenmore Village Hall. In an era when bureaucracy and legal matters were considerably less than today, they were quickly able to gain the momentum to gain approval for the plan and construction began shortly thereafter after a couple hurdles were jumped. Supporters of the course appealed to not only those who played or were interested in the game itself, but also those who would see the economic benefits. Its construction and operation would employ a sizable number at a time when jobs were scarce. They also rightfully noted that well-managed municipal courses not only paid for themselves through fees and concessions, but would turn a profit over time that would be returned to the municipality for other uses. In addition, it was considered a great opportunity that should be seized as the County and State would pay for roughly half of the course's construction. It was a novel opportunity too. Prior to the New Deal, investments in local projects were almost always borne by local taxpayers. Some Town residents nevertheless felt that the \$3,000 (with the other estimated \$4000 being picked up by the State Temporary Emergency Relief Committee) that the Town would need to raise through bonds could be better spent on other local projects.

Its appeal as an unemployment relief project gainfully employing forty locals, and whose wages would be paid by the County Charity Department, overcame any opposition. The course, however, almost never came to

fruition as the Town was unable to initially sell its bonds to fund its share. No explanation can be found as to why, but the most logical explanation would be that it suffered from poor credit worthiness due to the speculative debacle of the 1920's. Of course, as the Depression settled in other municipalities experienced similar financial

distress. As a consequence, the State government took the new step of ensuring the bonds, through a bill signed by Governor Roosevelt, in return for a certain amount of oversight in the future. It is interesting to note that no references can be found as to why no opposition existed to the proposed golf course eating up a sizable part of the new recreational Sheridan Park. It may stem from the long forgotten fact that it was only a nine hole course initially. Further, this new nine hole course (and with shorter holes than today) would be constructed to the south of Sheridan Drive as well as just to the north.

The "beauty spots" to the east and north would not be greatly affected. As the accompanying 1927 aerial shows, this land had been cleared prior to the park's opening and it may have been felt that a golf course was the best way to beautify these two areas of the park during financially challenging times. Finally, from early on it was understood that the course was to be used at times for other recreational activities, and subsequently always has been albeit not always without friction. William Harries, a landscape architect, would design the course as he would come to design approximately a dozen others throughout Western New York including Brighton many years later. Although never mentioned in the discussion of all-time great golf course architects, Harries was capable of designing a creative and challenging course if both the terrain and budget allowed it. It has been stated that he rarely was afforded both along with the opinion Sheridan was a course developed on great terrain but with an average budget.

For unrelated reasons, the course would come in over budget at \$14,000 to \$15,000 (depending on the source) with the final cost being split between the State and Town. Yet delays were also not responsible for the doubling of the original estimate as work had proceeded quickly. In fact, optimists had predicted that it might be opened by or during the fall of 1932. The optimism of one reporter was evident in his description: "The June 1932 work is progressing on the new nine-hole golf course in Sheridan Park, Tonawanda. With favorable weather conditions, that is a sufficiency of sun and rain, the layout may come along in time for opening in late August. The course promises to be the sportiest municipal affair hereabouts. A small lake is situated in the park and Two-Mile Creek meanders through. The land is of the rolling and sloping type and will allow for many clever shots. None of the holes is too long and the drive one or two that will call for brassie seconds will demand well placed shots. The course will be an approximate 2,900 yards in length. Greens have been cut out and on No. 1 and the young grass is beginning to show."

The opening ceremony would in reality not occur until the 13th of May of the following year and included the pomp and circumstance typical of the era including band music and the first ball being driven by the head of the public links section of the USGA. The 2,900 foot par 35 nine hole course was noted for only one flat hole on a course otherwise rife with ravines, depressions and an abundance of water hazards. Thirty five men were initially employed on the new Sheridan Park Golf Course with the number increasing to sixty as the first year progressed. To play the nine-hole golf course in 1933 would set a golfer back \$5 for a season pass, twenty-five cents during the week and a half dollar on the weekends.

Louis Dietschler would also be instrumental in establishing the Sheridan Park Golf Club that same year and served as its first president. The women, not to be outdone, established their own club. Beyond any possible sexism as to why the clubs were gender distinct, they served as social hubs for sometimes gender specific

activities such as teas, bridge and bowling. The Sheridan Golf Club still exists as of today with a handful of the accompanying pictures "borrowed" from their website.

One early conflict between the new pay-to-play course and Sheridan Park being established as a recreational area for all revolved around the "Kenmore cabins". Shortly after the opening of the park, a cabin was constructed for local boys to enjoy outdoor activities. The following year a girl's cabin was added. The cabins will be detailed more thoroughly in the future article about the establishment of Sheridan Park. Yet for now it needs to be mentioned that oddly neither was moved when the golf course was constructed. The girl's cabin can be seen in the accompanying sketch. The boys cabin, however, was situated right in the middle of a new fairway. This made for an interesting obstacle for golfers, but a potentially dangerous reality for the young individuals using the cabins. Incredulously, it was not until the second year that it was decided that the cabins needed to be relocated, though it remains unclear as to where. One source stated they were being replaced by new ones being constructed in Lincoln Park along with a toboggan slide and an ice rink for a "Scout Center". Yet no subsequent references to the cabins nor the slide having ever existed in Lincoln Park can be found. It seems more likely they were moved to another location within Sheridan Park and that one of the two remained extant for some years in Sheridan Park before being taken down or repurposed.

As stated previously, the original Sheridan Course was a nine-hole course rather than eighteen hole one. Nothing is explicitly stated that the course was to be expanded to eighteen holes, but the fact that it was in 1934 certainly implies that there was an implicit intent by its supporters that it would be. The original design for a nine hole course was most likely to keep the upfront costs down, limit local opposition to the park being "taken over" by the course and to ensure that the course would at the least be financially self supporting. The fact that it proved very successful financially the first year, and which allowed the golf course to employ even more locals, was enough for the expansion to be given the green light.

By October of 1934 it was written that the new nine holes were "gradually emerging from rough gullies, swampland and a rubbish dump" and well along toward completion. A newspaper interview summarizes the course and its expansion at the time best: "Park Superintendent John J. Sexton, who also is supervising construction of the course, said today that construction will be completed this fall on the new fairways and greens, but he does not believe that playing will be permitted next spring because the grass will not be heavy enough. The first nine holes in use for two seasons also has been improved this summer and has provided nearly 60,000 rounds of golf during the season. Mr. Sexton said the income is nearly as high as last year and play has been above the 1933 mark. When the course is finally opened for the full 18 holes it will extend from a point near the Town incinerator plant to Woodward Avenue, a distance of one and one-half miles. Six holes have been developed this season between Woodward avenue and Sheridan Drive. Three are being built in the area north of the present caddy house at Ensminger Road. In this area thousands of yards of dirt were dumped onto swampy land, a \$20,000 concrete highway and bridge were covered over because it was decided the section of roadway was not important for park purposes and would return more revenue as part of the golf course."

Throughout the rest of the 1930's, the course would prove an economic success. So much so, that by 1936, the City of Tonawanda looked enviously on and decided to establish its own course on Town land and then annex it to the City. One potential location was considered near where the present Brighton course is now located. Another was in the very northwestern corner of the Town adjoining the City. This would be procured through foreclosing on the Shelling Estate for non-payment of taxes. For unknown reasons, this particular land grab attempt by the City never occurred.

The 1940's would come to highlight the golf course's increased use for other activities, specifically in winter when it was transformed into a "winter wonderland" for ice skating, hockey, sledding and tobogganing. A short separate post exists on the toboggan slide, possibly the second as a couple vague references suggest a previous one had been constructed in the 1930's. With its abundance of water hazards, finding lost golf balls in Two Mile Creek and Sheridan Lake became a popular activity for young individuals as a means to make extra pocket money. As one long time course veteran, and who grew up near it reminisced: "During the summer, I would walk down our street, Dumas Place, to the golf course and look for lost balls or retrieve them from the creek. I had to keep an eye out for the geezers (maintenance workers) because they didn't want me on the course."

In 1944 oil (and quite probably other pollutants), stated to have seeped into the stream from a nearby war plant, caught fire. It was believed to have been started when a golfer threw a lit cigarette in the creek. Regardless, the fire became quite a conflagration and covered an area 65 feet wide by 400 yards long. It would not be the only fire to occur in the waters at the Course, but serves to highlight the exacerbating havoc that industrialization would wrought on the Town's non-industrial areas. Two Mile Creek had been considered such a beautiful area just a quarter century before that it had regularly attracted visitors from well outside the Town. It is interesting to note that it had even been in consideration as the site for the 1901 Pan-American Exposition. With its source a natural spring, near to where the Eastern States grain elevator once stood, its deterioration due to man's activities began in earnest during the 1910's with the development of the Town's first industrial hub at Military Road and Ontario Street. An increasing amount of industrial waste and sludge would work their way downstream and be augmented by other polluters such as what has become known as the Kenmore (railroad) Yard. Linde's involvement in the Manhattan Project would result in around 8,000 tons of leftover sludge and liquid waste; an unknown amount of which would find its way into Two Mile Creek either directly or indirectly. A century later, the once showcase Two Mile Creek and Sheridan Lake of the Town and golf course resembles more of a ditch along most of its length. Sadly, it was recently ranked the eleventh most distressed waterway in the State.

New subdivisions in the 1950's would quickly overrun the Town including areas adjacent to the golf course. This rapid suburbanization would necessitate a massive investment in infrastructure. As a result, construction in the area would impact the course. The 1957 construction of a mammoth twin cell storm sewer on the east side of course damaged the course. Increasing traffic on Sheridan Drive led to a unique "bridge under a bridge" being built in 1958 so golfers would not need to cross Sheridan. Yet the 1950's were overall a decade of unbridled optimism in the Town with young energetic families, plentiful good jobs and a higher quality of life to enjoy than the majority of Americans had enjoyed in the past. With tax coffers overflowing, Town officials with the approval of voters spent (squandered?) their new found riches on a wide variety of uses. These included the construction of a large number of high quality schools to educate a very temporary surge of baby boomers and even funding a Town philharmonic. Attention also turned to the Town's only at-the-time golf course and a decision was made that it should be upgraded into one of the best golf courses in the Eastern United States.

The 1955 plans for the redesign of the golf course, by Russ Tryon, are included in the pictures. One practical improvement that stands out was splitting the golf course so the option to play either nine could be offered. Further, the ninth and eighteenth holes were relocated to near the clubhouse so as to reduce all the extra walking golfers had been obligated to do on the original course design. The estimated \$50,000 revamp also included narrowing the greens to attract more low handicap golfers and lengthening the course from 5,689 feet to an acceptable for tournaments one of 6,490. Another improvement near the end of the decade included a 1959 caddy house with a contracted out concession stand by the "old picnic grove". Others completed included new foot bridges, a new irrigation system, cleaning up Two Mile Creek as well as improving the bunkers and

traps. Many of these improvements were in part done with the aim of hosting the 1961 USGA National Public Links Tourney.

The Town would not come to host the 1961 Tourney, but it would come to do so in 1962. The tournament, along with other less prestigious ones would be held on the highly regarded redesigned tournament level modern course. The Sheridan Park Golf Club website has a very nice set of pictures of this course in 1962. The link can be found in the description for one of these pictures which is included with this post. A 1960's recollection of the redesigned course has been preserved as fewer and fewer remain as the years pass who can recollect having played it: "I don't remember much about the course except three holes do stand out. I think the second shot on the second hole, which paralleled Sheridan Drive, had to be hit over water to a green that fronted East Park Drive. And behind the green, the course had installed a 20' high fence to prevent golf balls from hitting houses located across the street. From there, golfers walked through a tunnel underneath Sheridan Drive to a par 3 third hole that fronted on East Park Drive. Holes three through eight were on the south side of Sheridan. Then to get to the ninth hole (now the 12th hole) it was back through the tunnel to the ninth tee where you had to drive the ball across the water. It couldn't have been more than a 50 yard drive (more like 175 yards from the back tees!) but I can vividly remember hitting ball after ball into the water and listen to my friend laughing disparagingly, with me screaming with every failed attempt. Not that he was able to do any better".

America's Bicentennial would mark the most pivotal year in the golf course's history during the 1970's. Western New York was reeling economically, with a good number of manufacturers shutting down, relocating or cutting back their operations. Linde, on the other hand, was faring quite well. In fact, to the point that it desired more office space at its Tonawanda facilities. With an inability to expand in other directions, Linde aimed to acquire eleven acres of the Sheridan Golf Course. Reactions to Linde's 1976 proposal were mixed. Naturally, golfers opposed the expansion as did residents in the surrounding neighborhoods. The residents were against the loss of rare parkland south of Sheridan Drive. A fear also existed of increased traffic, a loss of green views as well as lower property value. Yet the vast majority of the Town inhabitants were in favor as it would bring at least a few hundred well paying jobs sorely needed at the time. Town and County officials, who had exhibited a strong track record in supporting industry above all, were also supportive. Linde vowed to residents that the space would only be used for offices and not industrial use. Further, the facilities were designed to not intrude upon surrounding neighborhoods.

Hence, by 1977 the purchase went forward with the Town receiving \$95,000, but for a suddenly much larger 38 acre tract of Town public land. The State legislature had needed to approve it first, and did so, but with the requirement that 38 acres of land in the Town needed to be reclassified as parkland to equal out the loss. Various tracts were looked at, but in the end it was dubiously decided that Erie County would hand over 38 acres of Ellicott Creek park to the Town to meet this requirement. As the Town would become responsible for paying its maintenance, yet still lose a net 38 acres of locally accessible parkland, it would have to be concluded that Town residents lost in the end. Without having researched this in-depth, it is questionable if this handover actually ever even occurred.

It is outside the scope of this post, but should be mentioned that it is possible that Linde's desire to acquire much of the public land which was occupied mostly by the course south of Sheridan Drive was motivated at least in part by a desire to cover-up the hazardous effects of its uranium enrichment activities during the Second World War. Linde had been offered inducements to construct the offices elsewhere and in locations where approval would have been easier. Yet Love Canal and the toxic legacy of industrialization had been entering the American consciousness. The fires on Two-Mile Creek and Sheridan Lake, as well as the chemical smell that

golfers often experienced when traversing under Sheridan Drive's "bridge-under-the-bridge", are just two possible hints that Linde desired to discreetly enlarge the buffer zone around its (Praxair's) now well-known toxic property.

Regardless, Linde's purchase required that six holes be constructed to the north of Sheridan Drive to replace those lost to the south. A phased plan was put in place to minimize the effect it would have on golfers. Unfortunately, issues between the contactor and Course management did in fact result in inconveniences as well as time delays. It would take about two years for the final completion of the course's second and final revamp.

As the Sheridan Golf Course approaches its century anniversary, it has become part of the fabric of the Town itself with its now largest obstacle tied to the decline in the popularity of the game of golf itself and the resultant golf course closures which have occurred. Whether this decline is temporary or permanent is a phenomenon on which little agreement exists. Hence, it is certainly premature to suggest the same could happen to Sheridan, yet interesting to ponder, that if it were to ever come to pass, how it could be repurposed to best take advantage of the Town's most beautiful terrain.



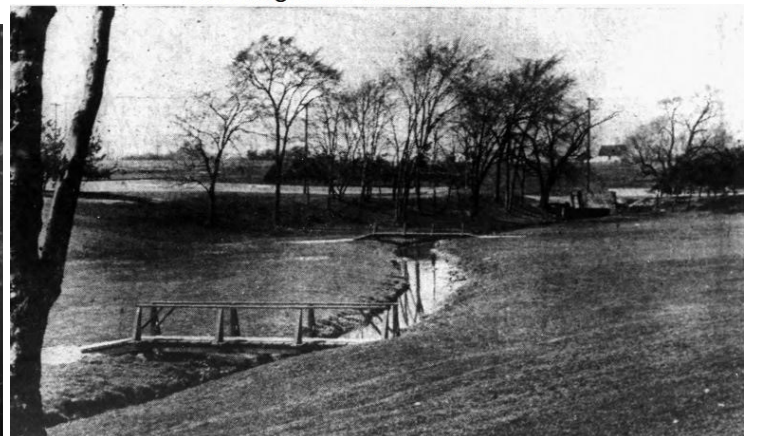
Construction of the Sheridan Golf Course in 1932



The bridge over the dam in 1955



An aerial of the course in 1950



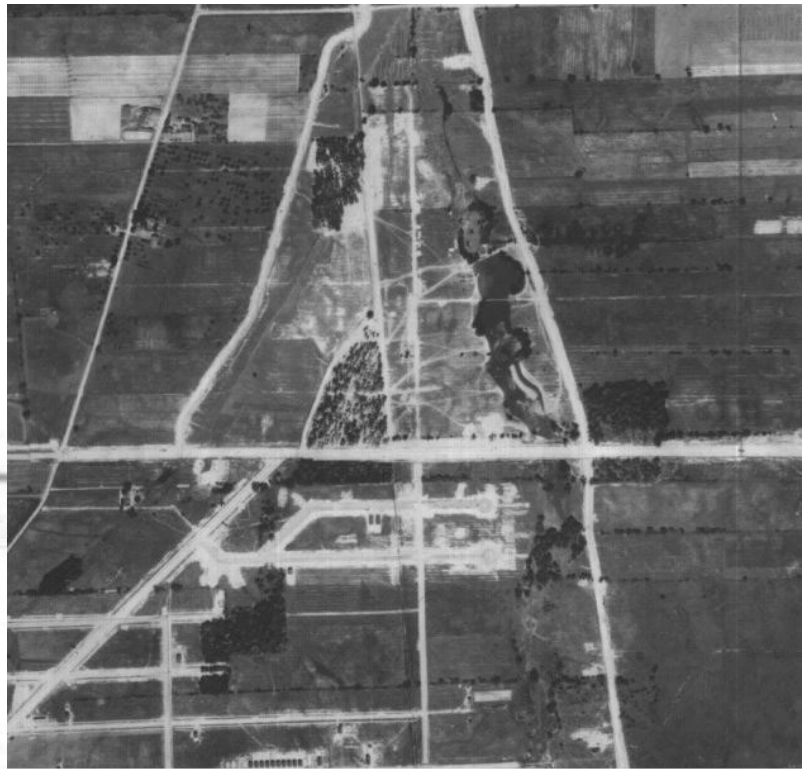
Preparing for an April opening in 1955



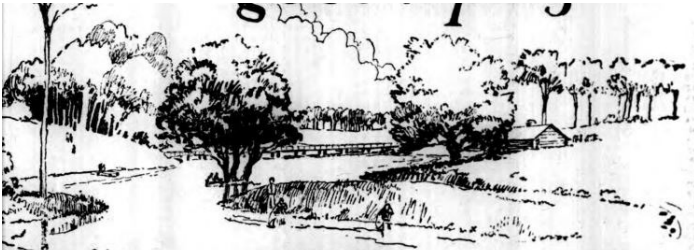
PHOTO BY W. H. FORTERFIELD

No Golf Today at Sheridan Park.

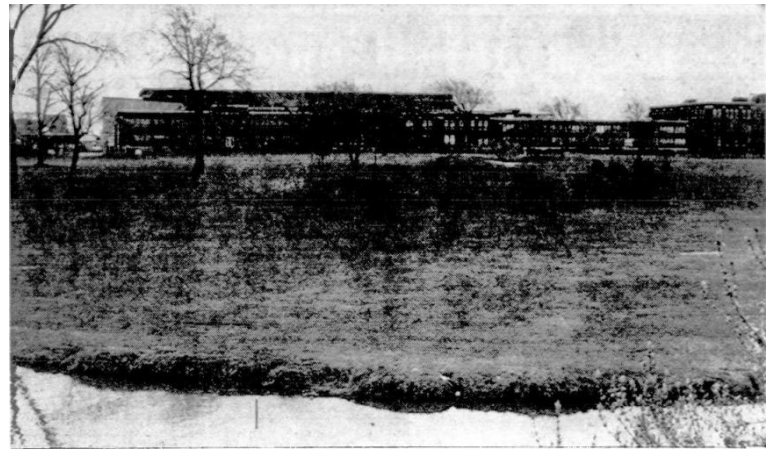
A view of the course in 1967



The 1927 aerial shows the new park with a fair amount of the land cleared, but some remaining tree groves to the east and north.



The new Shridan Park in 1927. The girls Kenmore Cabin can be seen to the right as well as the bridge over the lake.



A picture of part of the tract which Linde intended to purchase in 1976



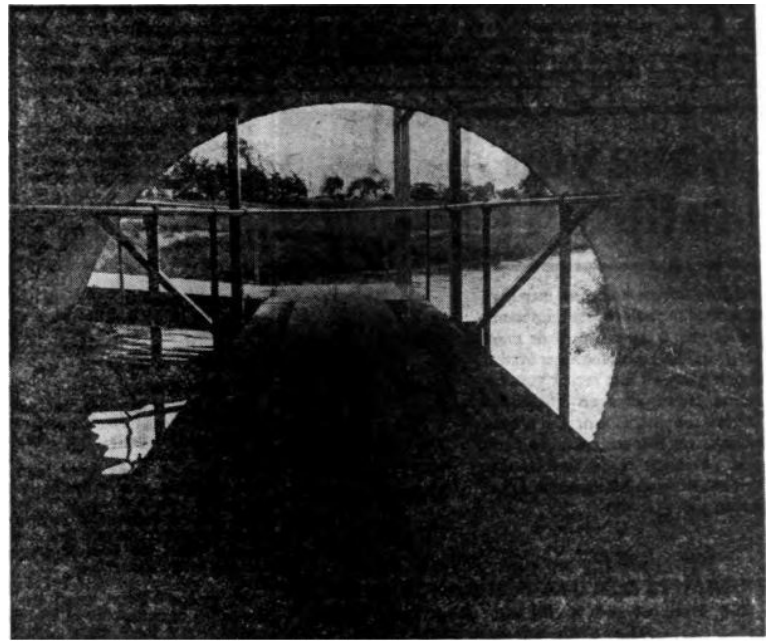
Sheridan Park Golf House

October 1963

Sheridan Clubhouse (Photo courtesy of Sheridan Park Golf Club)



Sheridan Lake on fire in 1970



A 1967 view of the Sheridan Drive 1958 "bridge under a bridge"



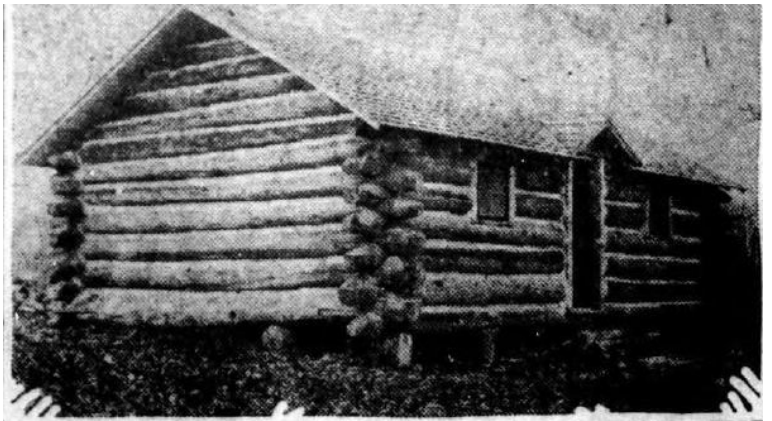
The 1957 massive storm sewer negatively impacted the course directly and indirectly



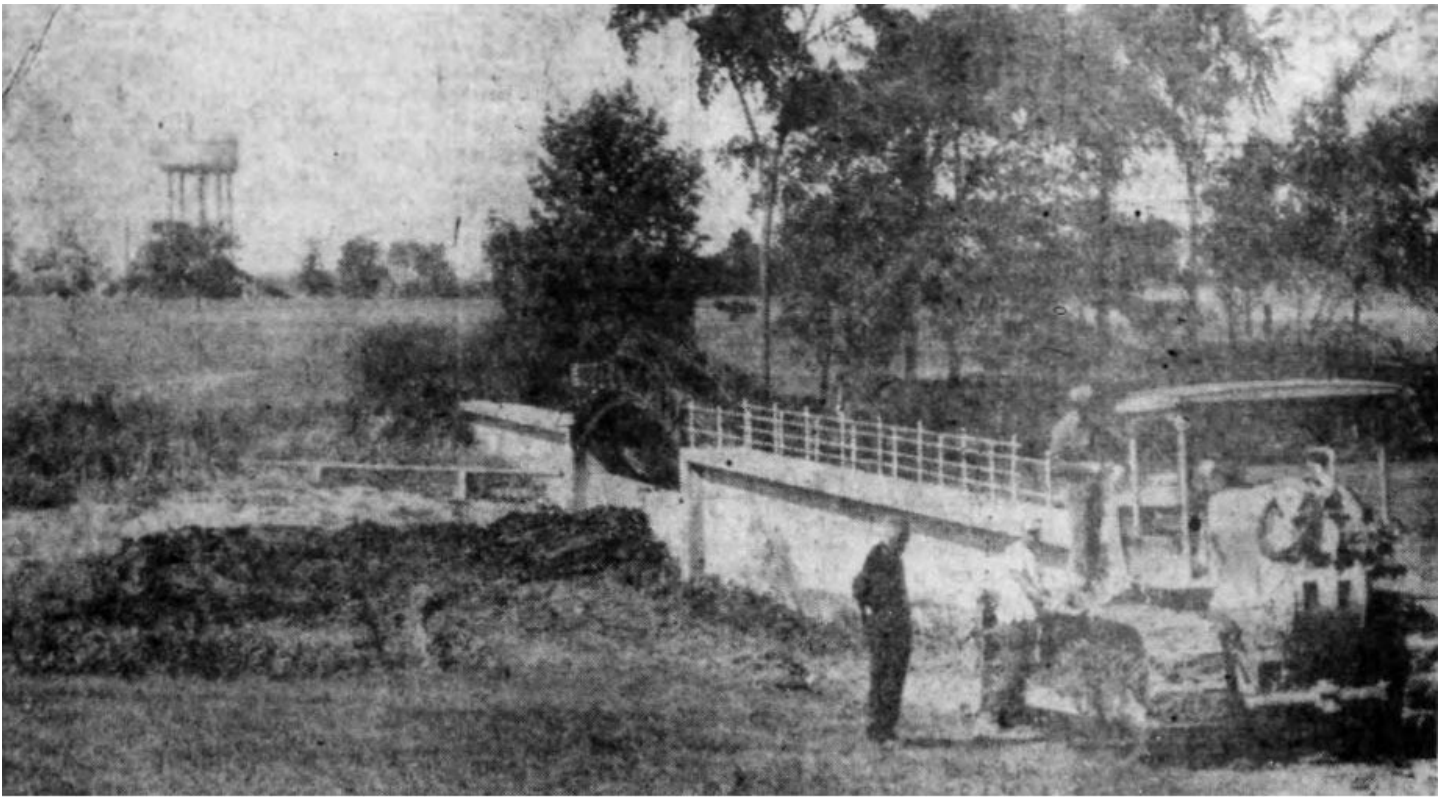
A 1960 aerial of the recently revamped course



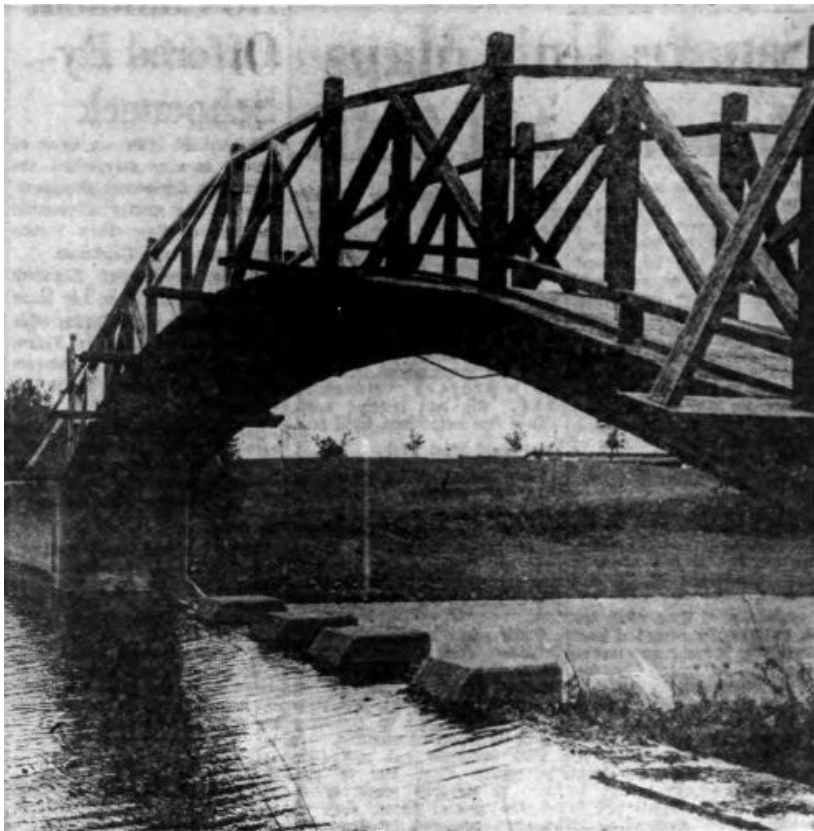
The grand opening ceremony in 1933



The boys Kenmore cabin which would find itself right in the middle of a fairway for a couple seasons before being relocated.



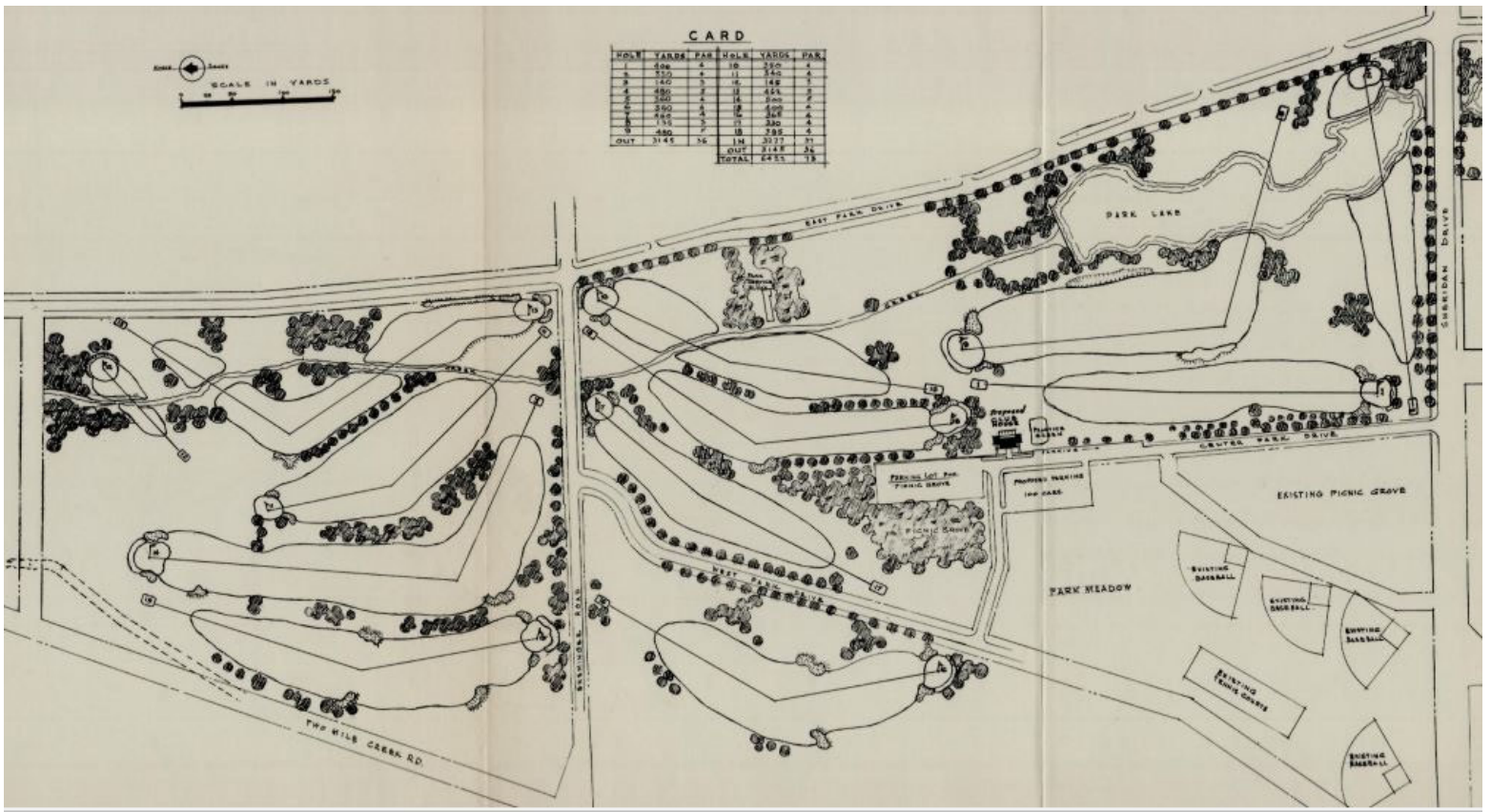
Dredging of Sheridan Lake in 1955. Development post WW2 caused the Lake to be dredged on more than one occasion. The fact that it started to occur in the 1940's before the mass post WW2 construction, and its resultant erosion began, suggests industrial sludge may have been a root cause too



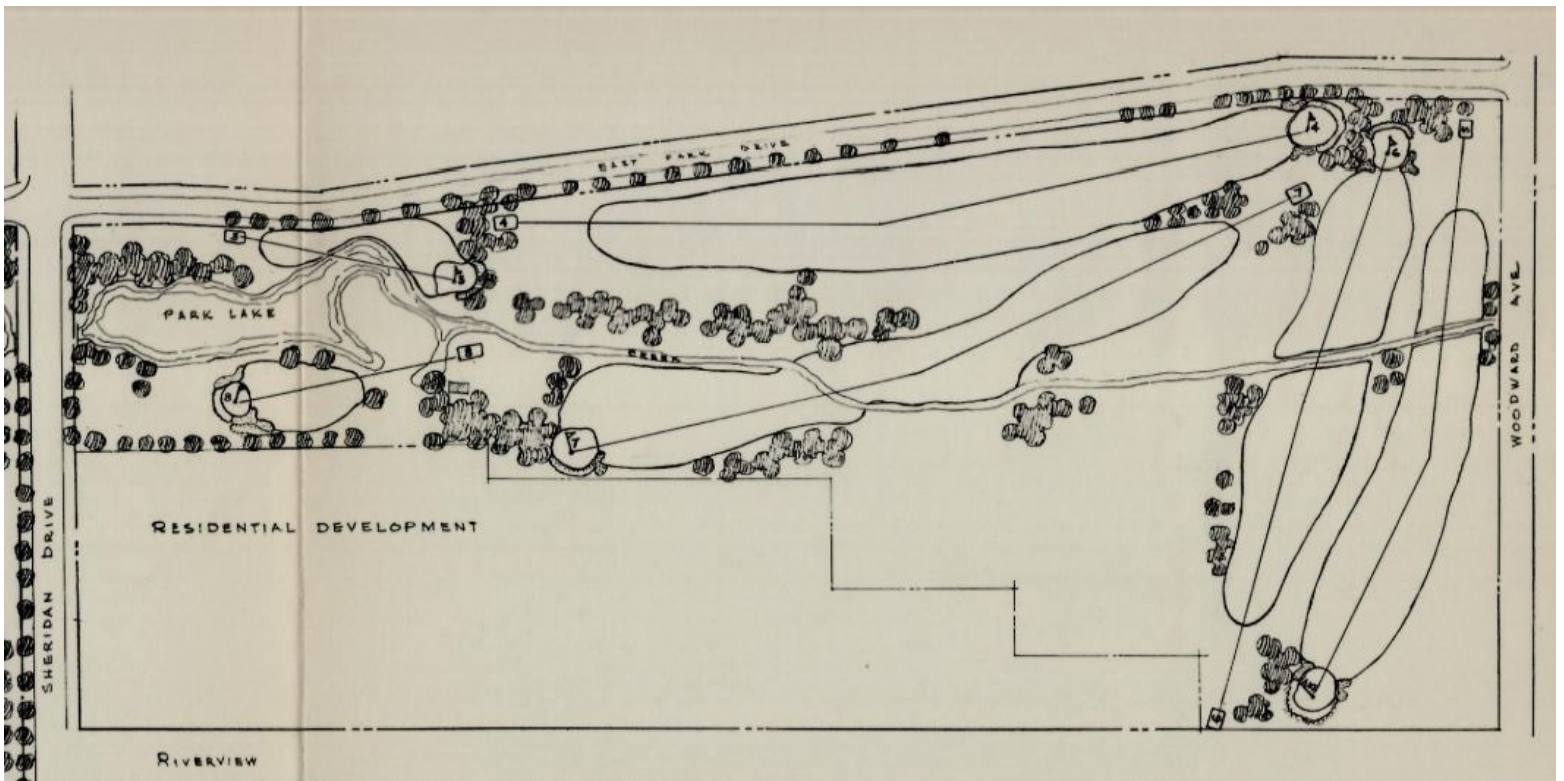
A picture of a foot bridge in 1967



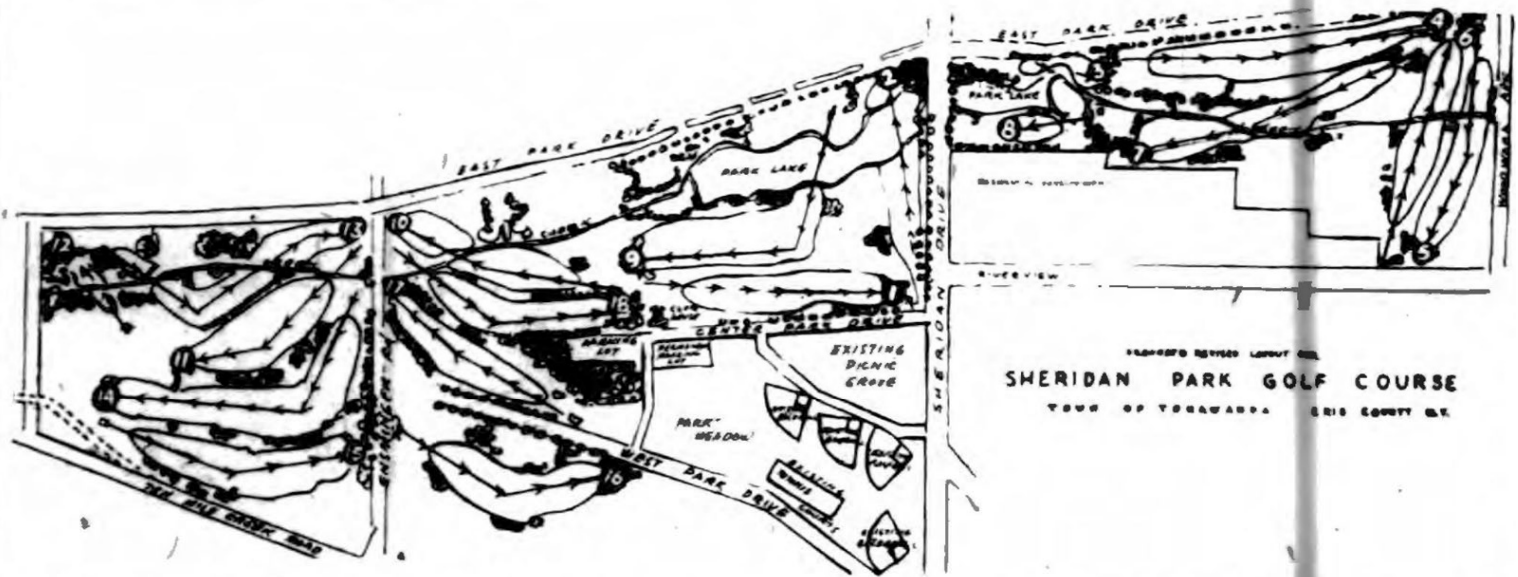
Children watch the major 1944 Creek fire



Russ Tryon's 1955 revised Sheridan Golf plan (north)



Russ Tryon's 1955 revised Sheridan Golf plan (south)



SHERIDAN GOLF PLANS—The above plans for the revised layout for the Sheridan Park golf course were drawn by Planning Consultant A. Russell Tryon. Approximately 800 yards will be added to the par 70 layout, bringing the total length to about 6,500 yards. The plans eliminate narrow and criss-crossing fair-

ways which have plagued golfers at the Sheridan layout. Town of Tonawanda officials are hopeful that the new layout will be successful in bringing major golf tournaments to the Sheridan Park course. Tryon has designed several of the leading courses in the Midwest.

A 1950's diagram of the course layout.



In 1955 Paul Hahn, trick shot wizard, and US Open Champion Jack Fleck held a clinic

DUNLOP GOLF SHOW



Featuring
PAUL HAHN
WORLD'S GREATEST TRICK SHOT GOLFER

SPECIAL GUEST APPEARANCE
JACK FLECK
1955 U. S. Open Golf Champ



BOTH PAUL HAHN AND JACK FLECK ARE MEMBERS OF DUNLOP'S GOLF ADVISORY STAFF

WEDNESDAY, JULY 27, 7:15 p. m.
SHERIDAN PARK GOLF COURSE
SHERIDAN DRIVE — TONAWANDA, N. Y.

—FREE TO THE PUBLIC—

SPONSORED BY DUNLOP TIRE & RUBBER CORP.
SHERIDAN DRIVE & RIVER RD. — BUFFALO 5, N. Y.
Manufacturers of world famous Dunlop Golf Balls
Pioneers of the pneumatic tire & foam rubber industries

By 1955, the nearby Dunlop Golf Course was no more, but they sponsored this demonstration



The 1962 Public Links Program

THE U. S. G. A. EXTENDS

The United States Golf Association takes pleasure in returning to Western New York State for this 37th Amateur Public Links Championship.

Thirty-six years have elapsed since the Championship was last played in this area at Buffalo's Grover Cleveland Park. The interim has been marked by an intensive growth in golf. To validate this claim, one need look no further than at the 9,480 entries filed for eight USGA Championships last year.

Keeping pace with increase in number of courses and number of players in this country has been the cadre of volunteer workers for golf. Without their efforts it would be impossible to stage Championships such as this.



FRED BRAND, JR.
Chairman, USGA Public Links Committee

Members of the USGA's Amateur Public Links Committee donated their time and efforts to conduct the Sectional Qualifying Rounds that determined the field of 150; the cooperation of the Western New York Municipal Golf Association, with Mr. Arthur E. Cole as General Chairman, in preparing for this Championship has been outstanding.

In behalf of the Public Links Committee, I extend the USGA's warm welcome to every one of the 150 players here for the Championship.

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PUB LINKS

WESTERN NEW YORK

By Lou Simon

SHERIDAN PARK, the home for the 37th Amateur Public Links Championship of the United States Golf Association, also is the site for the only major competitive golf league in the Niagara Frontier area.

The Twilight League, organized in the spring of 1955, truly is a famine-to-feast story which features a dedicated effort by many individuals who strived to place the sport on a high-level competitive basis.

From a determined beginning of 50 diehard individuals, the league now boasts 120 members who take to the fairways each week of the season in a spirit of head-on, though friendly, contests.



LOU SIMON
Tonawanda NEWS Sports Editor

Franklin J. J. Diemer, director of parks and recreation for the Town of Tonawanda, got the golf ball rolling for the league when he invited more than 45 enthusiasts to discuss the possibilities of such a venture . . . And with much encouragement from Mrs. Cecilia Fahnstock, the publisher of the Kenmore Record Advertiser, the Twilight League was realized.

Clyde Farnan was the league's first president in 1955, with Jack Morse vice president and Duncan Tutton chairman. Mr. Farnan continued as president for three years.

And this group proved a driving force in making the public linkser of this area more than a weekend duffer.

Jack Heinrich took over as the league's prexy in 1958 with Lew Faux, Jr. at the reins in 1959 and 1960. During the Faux era, the league adopted a constitution and its by-laws now make the organization one of the best-knit golf units in the state.

Dave Nies currently heads the league which has 18 teams with eight golfers to each team. The circuit's annual banquet last year attracted 300 persons to the Buffalo Launch Club. Since the league's origin, the Record-Advertiser has maintained sponsorship and continues to present the championship trophy under its new publisher, Mrs. Charles Hewitt Jr.

While the Twilight League can claim much credit for making golf a top-notch competitive sport in the Niagara Frontier, tournaments and other attractive programs may be found at no less than 11 other public or municipal courses. And they all are within a half-hour ride of the Town of Tonawanda.

The town's only other municipal course will be in full bloom this season at Brighton while the Twin Cities have a public course at Creekside. Creekside is one of the few public (not municipal) courses operating in this area.

The Town of Amherst has its splendid layout at Audubon while the Buffalo municipal courses boast Delaware, Grover Cleveland, South Park and Cazenovia.

At Niagara Falls, it's Hyde Park with the Niagara-Orleans course also a steady location for the area puttsters. And more recently, the Niagara County course at Lockport has been prepared for a traffic-heavy season. Plans are being drawn to include a few more golf courses for the Niagara Frontier with Grand Island a definite commitment.

Overall, the Niagara Frontier can boast of its place in the golf sun even though the per-capita situation is far from ideal.

While the national average is a golf course for every 29,000 population (there were more than 6,100 courses in the U. S. last year), the Niagara Frontier has a long way to go to reach this level.

However, if the planning and enthusiasm of those individuals who are bringing the Publinkx championship here continues, there's no limit to where the mushrooming golf picture will end.