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75 Mile-high tradition

Denver's Wellshire GC celebrates its own milestone anniversary.

Gregg A. Blew, CGCS

The year was 1926. Pontiac produced its first car; Henry Ford initiated the five-day, 40-hour workweek; Charles Lindbergh's Spirit of St. Louis took flight for the first time; and the first fueled rocket was launched. On the entertainment scene, Norma Jean Baker, a.k.a. Marilyn Monroe, was born on June 1; Harry Houdini was dazzling audiences until his death later that year; jazz greats Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman were playing; and NBC, the National Broadcasting Co., came into being. Calvin Coolidge was inaugurated as the 30th president, and it only took 2 cents to send a first-class letter. In sports, the NFL's New York Giants took to the field, the NHL's Detroit Red Wings squared off for their first game, and Bobby Jones, the winner of the British Open in 1926, and Walter Hagen teed off for a 72-hole exhibition match where Hagen gave Jones one of his worst career defeats. Also in 1926, the National Association of Greenkeepers of America (later GCSAA) was formed, and the Donald Ross-designed course, the Wellshire Country Club, opened in Denver on Aug. 28.

From exclusive club to municipal jewel

In 1924, a group of golfers contracted with Donald Ross to design a golf course, to be built four miles south of Denver. With Ross' associate, Walter P. Hatch, they surveyed the 137-acre Skeel family farm. The site had a 15-acre lake and an irrigation canal running through the farm from the lake. The construction of Wellshire was handled personally by one of Ross' ablest construction engineers, Henry Hughes Sr., who was retained to be the "keeper of the green."

On Aug. 28, 1926, Wellshire CC opened with a nine-hole tournament on the completed holes. The Skeel family farmhouse served as the clubhouse until Oct. 16, 1927, when the Tudor-style clubhouse opened. The total cost for constructing the clubhouse and the 18-hole course was \$300,000.

Wellshire offered many activities to its members besides golf. There were boating, fishing and other water sports on Skeel Reservoir, a trap shooting course and a putting course with lights. One of the more unique features at



Renowned architect Donald Ross designed Wellshire CC (now Wellshire GC) on 137 acres of farmland near Denver. It opened in August 1926.



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Wellshire was its deep rock artesian well that supplied all of the water to the clubhouse as well as the shower baths.



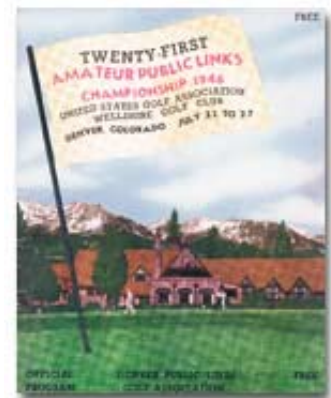
Even with its lavish amenities and Ross design, Wellshire CC was to have a short life. With the start of the Great Depression, the club fell into financial ruin and into foreclosure in July 1928. For the next eight years, the country club struggled financially until Sept. 3, 1936, when the city of Denver purchased the entire facility for \$60,000. This made the renamed Wellshire Golf Course one of the finest municipal golf courses in the country.

Making history

Wellshire's reputation and popularity grew tremendously over the next 10 years, and it hosted the 21st USGA Amateur Public Links Championship in July 1946. The tournament had a field of 192 players from across the United States and Canada. The winner was Smiley Quick of Inglewood, Calif., who defeated Louis Stafford 3 and 2 over the 36-hole route.

In 1948, the Denver Open, a professional tournament benefiting the youth of Denver, was held at Wellshire GC. Ben Hogan won the three-day tournament with a 72-hole score of 270. He beat Fred Haas Jr. by one stroke to win \$2,150. Hogan finished in the afternoon, and thinking he was not going to win, left for the train station to head to Salt Lake City for the next tournament. While waiting for his train to leave, he found out that he did indeed win, but was unable to return to Wellshire to collect his winnings in person. This was Hogan's sixth consecutive tour win, a streak not matched until 2000 when Tiger Woods accomplished the feat. It was reported by one of the local newspapers that Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower was in the gallery to watch the tournament. The Denver Open was cancelled later that year due to lack of financial support.

Wellshire GC hosted its first high-profile tournament in July 1946, the 21st USGA Amateur Public Links Championship. Thirteen years later, the event returned to Wellshire.



Until 1950, Wellshire GC was outside the city limits of Denver. This changed in May 1950 when the city of Denver annexed Wellshire. The growth of Denver toward Wellshire was just starting, and soon the course would be surrounded by homes. The late '50s saw the clubhouse go through a \$100,000 remodeling before it reopened in July 1958.

A few months later the Denver Open, now called the Denver Centennial Open, returned to Wellshire. Unlike the closely contested 1948 Denver Open, Tommy Jacobs led throughout the tournament. With a score of 266 for 72 holes, he walked away with \$2,800. Arnold Palmer also played, and he tied for third with Howie Johnson with a score of 270. To finish out the '50s, the 34th USGA Public Links Championship returned to Wellshire. There were 192 players for the six-day tournament. The winner, 23-year-old Bill Wright, was the first black man to win a major national tournament.

A few years later, on May 8, 1962, a small fire broke out in the restaurant's coffee shop. It did not take long before it was a three-alarm fire. By the time the fire was put out, the entire building was gutted. The estimated damage was \$300,000, which was the original price to build the entire facility. By March 1963, the clubhouse was rebuilt and opened to rave reviews in the city's newspapers.

The modern era

During the rest of the '60s and '70s, few changes were made to the clubhouse or the golf course. In 1976, the Wellshire Restaurant Co. was awarded the concession contract and renamed the restaurant

the Wellshire Inn. The three partners renovated the entire clubhouse, which brought the Tudor building back to its former splendor and quickly became, and remains, one of Denver's finest dining establishments. The Trophy Room, now the Golfer's Pub, opened in July 1977 to the excitement of the golfers, with the Wellshire Inn opening later that year.

The golf course itself saw no major renovations until 1991 when a master plan was drawn up by Dick Phelps and his son, Rick Phelps of Richard M. Phelps Ltd. The plan included tee renovation, golf car paths, mounding, lowering of the eighth fairway and an option for two lakes with hole realignment. From the fall of 1992 to the summer of 1993, a new irrigation system was installed. It took Wellshire from the quick-coupler era to a state-of-the-art, computerized irrigation system with a Toro Network 8000 and a PSI pumping station. During this time several car paths were poured, three tees rebuilt, the eighth fairway lowered, two shelters built and drainage improvements to the 17th fairway were made.

In the subsequent years, special attention has been given to improving playing condition, replacing bridges, pouring additional car paths, adding three acres of native grass and wildflowers, and building a water feature on the 17th hole, which added to the beauty and challenge of the golf course. In 2000, the Denver Golf Division took control of the pro shop operations and completely remodeled it, made improvements to the driving range and purchased a fleet of golf cars.

A tradition at Wellshire is the Wellshire Four Ball. It is a three-day tournament over Labor Day weekend that is always full with a waiting list. It is the longest continuous tournament in Colorado, dating back to 1943. Wellshire is busy every year with four days of league play, tournaments of all sizes including numerous shotguns and at least one tournament with the Colo-rado Golf Association.

Celebrating 75

On July 13, 2001, Well-shire GC held its 75th Anniversary Celebration and Tournament. A full field of players included city officials, the golf advisory committee, board members of the Rocky Mountain GCSA, members of the Colorado section of the PGA, employees of the Denver Golf Division as well as the course's regular customers. Following the tournament, everyone enjoyed a buffet prepared by the Wellshire Inn of roasted chicken breast, rainbow trout and a cut of beef called "Steamship Round," which was reminiscent of a dish from the '30s.

After being purchased by the city of Denver in 1936, Wellshire CC's name was changed to Wellshire Golf Course and quickly became one of the country's premiere municipal layouts.



After the meal, Tom Woodard, director of golf for the city of Denver, introduced me to the audience. I spoke of the great cooperation between the pro shop, the banquet department and the chef of the Wellshire Inn and my staff who had the golf course in great shape for such a memorable day. Even the weather cooperated, and the rain and wind held off until the celebration was finished.

Next, was the showing of our anniversary video depicting the history of Wellshire. We used old black-and-white and color photos of events and changes in the restaurant and golf course, interviews with older members of the women's and men's golf clubs and video of the Wellshire Inn and golf course as they are today. There were the old programs from the 1946 and 1959 USGA Public Links tournaments, an interview with Babe Lind, past director of golf for Denver, and a collage of Wellshire Men's Club's membership booklets dating back to 1938.

After the video, Dennis Lyon, CGCS, director of golf for the city of Aurora (Colo.) and a 28-year member and past president of GCSAA, presented Wellshire GC with a framed replica of a letter that Donald Ross wrote to GCSAA founder Col. John Morley in October 1926 supporting the greenkeepers forming

their own association. Once the formal part of the program was finished, it was time to hand out the prizes. The team representing the course's maintenance staff took third. To close a perfect day and celebration, two birthday cakes were served.

I cannot thank everyone enough for helping to make this event a success. Included were many hours spent at the library researching through many yards of microfilm, many phone calls, donated items and food. Many thanks to my staff for putting up with me and providing excellent course conditions for the entire golf season. We found out many interesting things about Wellshire and acquired numerous artifacts that will be cherished for another 75 years. Wellshire is rich in tradition, and we look forward to maintaining that tradition.

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