



**Tom Riordan**  
Executive Editor

## Saga of Aviation Country Club is told

In the lush 1920s, a group of high-rolling Detroiters decided to build an exclusive club.

There would be two parts. In downtown Detroit, they'd have a facility to rival the Detroit Athletic Club. Some 30 miles to the northwest, in West Bloomfield Township, a country club would be the second half. It would feature a sporty, 18-hole golf course, riding stables, large clubhouse and a pier for swimming in beautiful Green Lake.

Truly this was all fit for a millionaire, or the guy who lived like one.

**TO GET FROM ONE FACILITY TO THE OTHER**, members would fly. They'd grab a charter at Detroit City Airport and touch down at the club's Green Lake strip, which was to be built at Keith and Willow roads.

The golf course, laid out to run along Green Lake's north shore, would wrap around tiny Flanders Lake, also on the property.

As the course was being completed, work began on the downtown Detroit club, in the area of First and Howard.

Being men of vision, the owners named it the Aviation Country Club.

One thing they didn't see, however, was what was about to happen to their finances. Almost without warning, the Great Depression in 1929 unfurled its sledge-hammer blow to world economy.

Like so many other grand ideas, the concept of the Aviation Country Club was dead.

For more than a decade, the steel work on the downtown club stood naked. Later it was taken over by new owners and completed — not as a club, but rather as apartment-type residences.

**I'M NOT AT ALL CERTAIN** how Walter Flanders figured in this opulent plan. But it was Flanders, builder of the Flanders Twenty car, who owned all the land around Green Lake from 1909 until the mid-'20s.

In 1911, he built a stone mansion and nearby a three-story garage, which had two bowling lanes in the basement. He sold these and the land to Aviation's promoters about 1924.

The mansion became the clubhouse. The garage was turned into a recreation center.

Following the crash of '29, the property was picked up by another group which renamed it Lockhaven Country Club. Golf continued on the course, horse riding out of the stables and swimming in the lake.

As with that first bunch of high rollers, money problems dogged the second set of owners.

In about 1934 or '35, a cluster of members decid-

ed to take over, each kicking in a few thousand dollars. For a third — and final — time, the facility got a new name: Green Lake Country Club.

**THAT'S WHEN I GOT TO KNOW** of this delightful summer recreation area. My dad and his brother, who were partners in a machine tool business, became members.

Each Sunday through May, June, July and August, the Riordan parents and we kids would take that nearly one-hour drive from northwest Detroit to Green Lake.

The Riordan men and boys would play golf, the girls would ride. As the afternoon wore on, we'd all end up swimming in the crystal-clear water of Green Lake. Then it was off to the club's dining room for dinner, the entire Riordan clan sitting around one huge table.

That was really living. It ran from about 1936 to 1941.

Enter World War II. Exit forever Green Lake Country Club.

**ALL OF THIS HISTORY** came back to me last weekend as I labored my way around nine holes on a course in Jackson. It was warm and sunny, perfect for golf. My mind drifted back to the time when I learned the game at Green Lake.

Something a guy will never forget.

Like that first hole. It was about 260 yards, a gentle dogleg to the right. The fairway followed the lake's shore. A creek sliced across the grass at about 220 yards.

I still hear my dad telling my brother and me, "Try to hit your drive just to the right of that clump of birch. You'll be short of the creek. From there it's a chip to the green."

Someone would always recount the time that Walter Hagen, then golf's greatest professional, had played Green Lake. His tee shot on No. 1 landed on the green. That was some kind of blow in the days of wooden shafted clubs.

**AND GUESS WHAT?** After thinking last Saturday about those wonderful days at Green Lake as a teenager, I decided on an impulse Monday afternoon to see what that area of West Bloomfield looks like in the summer of 1979.

The golf course, long a subdivision of fine homes, is impossible to discern, except for some of the old willow trees which grow by both Green and Flanders lakes. It was great fun being able to recognize these giants, which were pretty big fellows back in the 1940s.

Most fascinating of all is the clubhouse.

Shortly after World War II, it became Green Lake Resthaven, an 86-bed home for the elderly. It looks almost exactly as it did then, with a huge front porch looking down from the top of a hill, surrounded by giant oaks. Some of those trees stand 60 and 70 feet tall.

**PARKING MY CAR** along the circular drive leading to the home, I wandered onto the porch, enthralled with the beautiful landscape. The front room with its oak paneled walls and beamed ceiling had not been changed. And there was the massive fieldstone fireplace.

My congratulations go to D.J. Bortz Jr., who operates this facility, for the way in which he has preserved the old clubhouse.

On my way out, there was still one more experience in store for me. I had heard that John Warren, one-time West Bloomfield official, had lived since 1947 off Willow Road, on what once was part of the golf course. A visit with Mr. Warren seemed in order.

John is steeped in the history of Green Lake. When I mentioned my interest in the one-time golf course, he quickly produced a copy of the original plat for Green Lake Hills dated March 1930. On the north shore is lettered Lockhaven Country Club, with 27 holes shown.

I studied the layout and quickly could tell the 18 holes which were actually developed didn't come out quite as planned.

He said he was never able to tell exactly on what hole his home was erected. One bit of terrain that always has fascinated him, however, was a plateau of sorts just west of his driveway. It is bordered on one side by trees and on another by deep depressions which could once have been sand traps. He surmised it might have been a green.

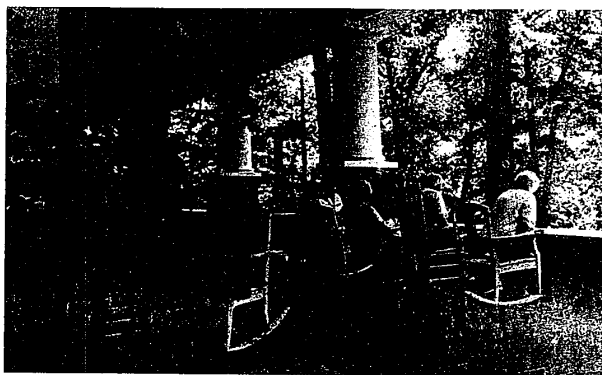
And well it might. Who knows? After some 40 years, I couldn't orient to the old layout.

**THEY SAY YOU CAN'T GO HOME** again, and I guess I really wasn't doing that on Monday — just sort of wandering through the past.

One thing for sure is that I wish I could somehow recapture that easy-going golf swing I had as a teen.

But that, dear friends, I'm sad to report is gone forever.

Airy and bright, the front porch of Green Lake Resthaven retirement home was once part of the Aviation, then Lockhaven, then Green Lake country clubs. It looks much like it did when built in 1911. A gently sloping front lawn, which runs down toward the water, is rich with giant oak trees, some stretching up to 70 feet in height.



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