

'This is not a country club'

King golf not only activity at Oakland

By SALLY GERAK

In 1945 at an Oakland Hills Country Club (OHCC) board of directors meeting, a member requested the podium to make the following statement: "Don't think that just because there's a swimming pool out there this is a family club. It's not. It's a men's golf club. The only reason it's called a country club is because it's in the country." Thus recalled retired former OHCC manager John Brennan during a recent interview.

The swimming pool referred to had not even been financed by the club, but rather by some individual families who were, to the apparent disdain of at least one board member, trying to add a family focus to life at Oakland Hills. (That pre-World War II pool cost those families \$37,000 and non-subscribers paid a pool fee to use it.)

Actually, a booklet published in 1924 that is currently on display in the Golf World Hall of Fame in Pinehurst, North Carolina, challenges that 1945 board members' sentiments. "Social life at the club is one round of gaiety throughout the season," it states. "There are informal dances every Wednesday and Saturday night; there are special entertainments monthly, bridge teas and luncheons for the ladies and special parties for the children. Oakland Hills, although primarily a golf club, is really a family club."

"During the spring of 1923," continued the writer, "a complete playground for the youngsters was opened adjoining the club. It is fitted with all kinds of outdoor play apparatus and is a popular spot with the children."

During Brennan's tenure in the 1940s, the staff also constructed a toboggan run. It started on a porch, where the mixed grill is now located, ended at the practice tee and was a source of much winter fun.

But the early playground, subscription pool and winter sled run would seem paltry recreational crumbs to today's youthful members. They enjoy a wide range of activities, including interclub participation in golf, tennis, swimming and paddle tennis. They are also the featured guests at the annual Children's Christmas Party, during which Santa entertains each youngster's request for Christmas Day wishes and gives the little ones a pre-Christmas gift. Children and grandchildren of members look forward to this special event.

Until the late '40s, the season at Oakland Hills ended with the traditional Feather Party in mid-November and that event is still a social highlight of club life. To call it a bingo party does not do justice to the sophisticated OHCC membership. Even during the war years, the committee was able to secure an impressive display of prizes. The piece de resistance at the 1945 gala, according to Brennan, was "a bottle of Scotch and a coveted pair of silk stockings." Today, a fashion show of furs precedes the bingo and excellent wine and gourmet baskets are featured prizes for party goers.

After the war, the club's social cal-

endar was extended to include a gala New Year's Eve dinner dance, which is still very popular with the members and now the club is only closed in January. Current manager Ray White said there is usually one big party a month with seasonal favorites, such as Valentines Day and St. Patrick's Day often attracting "turn-away response." The Tommy Dorsey Band, led by trombonist Buddy Morrow, will highlight this summer's Big Band party in August and a Las Vegas Night, in June, was also extremely popular, according to White.

Weekly Friday night Casino dances are always crowded as are the Sunday brunches, which one member described as "absolutely delightful," with a piano player providing relaxing background music. Also memorable are the happy wedding receptions, which are especially numerous during the summer months.

Easter Sunday and Mother's Day are especially busy times at OHCC, as is the Fourth of July. Family fun on the national holiday includes races and pony rides for the children, adult putting contests and a huge picnic buffet for all ages. (The same dining format is presented by White's staff on Memorial Day and Labor Day as well.) Until recent concern about safety factors due to increased traffic congestion on surrounding roadways caused its cancellation, a tremendous display of fireworks always climaxed the Fourth of July activities.

Athletic activity, though focused on the world-renowned golf course, is by no means limited to it. A new swimming pool and pool house, opened in 1971, is in constant use as are the six tennis courts and two paddle tennis courts. Exercise classes attract many lady members during the winter months and a few members use the course for winter cross country skiing. Both men's and ladies' locker rooms contain popular saunas and a new whirlpool in the men's locker room has attracted much use. Bowling leagues also involve many of the members during the winter months and a bowling invitational dinner dance caps that season for participants.

Although a non-golfing member confided that she personally "... wouldn't care if an atom bomb was dropped on the darn golf course," she did admit to a sense of pride in having friends from around the country revere the name Oakland Hills, and that awe is certainly inspired by the famous South Course. The clubhouse itself, completed in 1922 at a cost of \$650,000 unfurnished, is another source of pride.

As described in the 1924 booklet, when it was opened it ranked with the finest buildings of its kind in the country.

"Situated on a hill that overlooks the original course, the clubhouse follows the style of Mt. Vernon, gleaming with the white of its wide-sided walls



Life is more than golf to Oakland Hills Country Club members, even though the club's board of directors once warned not to call Oakland Hills a country club just because it had a swimming pool. Maggie Allesee is shown here with Dave Cosgrove at an October Showboat party.

and with the simple beauty of its colonial columns and small-paned windows," proclaimed the booklet.

During the past decade, the Club has spent several million dollars on improvements, renovations and additions to the clubhouse and club property. Extensive changes were made in 1968 which resulted in the removal of the 48 second-floor guest rooms. Those rooms had been a popular feature of the club in the early days, when the majority of the members lived in Detroit and would "... spend weeks at a time with their families at the club, motoring to business each morning."

A little-known fact regarding the remodeling, according to former manager Brennan, is that one man was responsible for applying the aluminum siding to the entire structure. His name is not recorded, but the arrangement was made because he was best at his trade and would keep the remodeling clutter cleaned up on a daily basis, thus minimizing inconvenience to the members. That tradesman took great pride in his work and was able to brag that he alone did the world's largest aluminum application job (up until that time, 1967-68).

For a short time, Oakland Hills

Country Club was also in the real estate business. Prior to 1945, land that was not needed by the club had been given to members. (This plan had been devised by member M.C. Coyle as a method to reduce the club's tax liability.) Many of those lots later reverted to the township for non-payment of taxes. Gradually, that property began to increase in value and an astute member — Bernard P. Costelli Sr. — suggested the club buy it back for resale. Brennan recalls that in 1947 the club bought lots from the township for as little as \$12.50 to \$37.50 each. They were subsequently sold by Howard Keating Realty for a considerable profit to the club.

Although golf is king at Oakland Hills, for many of the club's 850 members the camaraderie produced by the wide range of social and family activities represents the reason for flourishing membership at Oakland Hills Country Club. And, as current president Martin J. Gallagher stated in his January letter to the membership, "a few of us were born to this lifestyle; most of us aspired to it and worked hard to attain it. Regardless of how we arrived here, we can all agree that it is worth preserving."