

FORRE!

GOLF IN TELLURIDE DURING THE LEAN YEARS

MOST OF THE NEWS MAKING ITS WAY TO AND AROUND TELLURIDE DURING THE SPRING OF 1928 WAS LESS THAN UPBEAT. THE MINES WERE STILL WORKING, THOUGH OUTPUT WAS GREATLY DIMINISHED—MINED AS IT WAS BY A MUCH-REDUCED LABOR FORCE. BUSINESS WAS STILL BEING CONDUCTED ON MAIN STREET, THOUGH WITH FEWER MERCHANTS OPENING THEIR DOORS TO CONSIDERABLY FEWER SHOPPERS. THE RIO GRANDE SOUTHERN PULLED DAILY INTO THE DEPOT AT THE BASE OF TOWNSEND STREET MORE OUT OF HABIT THAN FOR ANY COMMERCIAL IMPERATIVE. THE POPULATION IN TOWN HOVERED AT JUST OVER 500.

By Paul O'Rourke

But in mid-May there was a decidedly more positive buzz in the air. It had nothing to do with an upturn in mining activity, with a new business coming to Town, or even with the delight associated with a return of springtime temperatures. All the excitement was over a diorama that had been placed in the office window at the Western Colorado Power Company. Just about everyone in Telluride made their way down to 324 West Colorado Avenue on May 16, anxious to get a look at the miniature replica of a nine-hole golf course, "artfully configured," reported *The Telluride*

Daily Journal, "replete with each fairway, tee box, and greens, down to the pins and flags." Rumor had it the Telluride Lions Club would have the course ready for play by the Fourth of July that same year.

"The (golf) bug has bitten both men and women of Telluride hard," proclaimed *The Journal*. "Golf rule books can be seen sticking out of coat pockets, discussions of the various whys and why nots of the game can be heard on street corners, and the merits of this and that sort of stick are freely discussed everywhere." The Telluride Hardware Company advertised, "Sets of four golf clubs and a

bag for \$10.00. A Spaulding book, 'How to Play Golf' FREE with every purchase of one or more clubs."

Almost as soon as word of the new golf course hit the streets, memberships (at \$10 per family) were sold as fast as the ID cards could be printed. Just about every one who was "anyone" in town joined up. By the newspaper's count, some 60 memberships were snapped up during that first week. That there were just 80 personal listings in the telephone directory seems to indicate there may have been fewer people in town not among those caught up in the

excitement over Telluride's new golf course.

A lease between the Lions Club and rancher, Robert Alexander, was perfected and construction, such as it was, commenced on the grounds just west and slightly south of Society Turn. On June 27, the newspaper proclaimed: TELLURIDE MUNICIPAL GOLF COURSE ANNOUNCED READY FOR PLAY NOW. "Telluride men," *The Journal* went on, "well versed in the art of the game say that Telluride has the best golf course on the Western Slope."

High praise indeed for a nine-hole layout where the fairways were

essentially converted pasture, more familiar to the valley floor's herds of cattle and sheep (and to other four-legged species of lesser refinement) than they were to the town's two-legged golf enthusiasts. Natural hazards and lost golf balls were commonplace. It was no rare occurrence, even for the more seasoned players, to lace a drive right down the middle of the fairway, only to discover when arriving at the ball's presumed resting place, that it had disappeared into a jumble of low-cut brush, or a thick patch of wild buffalo grass, one of several hundred prairie dog holes, had become lodged behind,

between, or even under a deposit of small stones, or had found its way onto a pile of animal dropping. The "lift, clean, and place rule" took on special meaning at the TMGC. It's unclear whether one-stroke penalties were assessed for balls lost or deemed unplayable in the fairway. If so, it may explain the relatively high scores—by today's standards anyway—recorded at the Telluride golf course.

Grass—if it existed at all—was a luxury in Telluride in the late 1920s. Grass was never planted or laid as sod at the town's new golf course. What about the "greens" you may ask. They certainly must have been made with

grass. Climate extremes at altitude and lack of adequate irrigation techniques at the time necessitated (if it was even debated) that the putting surfaces at Telluride's golf course be constructed of sand; actually a mixture of sand and oil. Such designs were not uncommon. Hall of Fame golf legends Bryon Nelson and Ben Hogan, Texas boys, cut their teeth on sand-green courses (at many courses they were aptly called "browns") during the 1920s and 1930s. From its inception in 1897 one of golf's great cathedrals, Pinehurst in North Carolina—host to three U.S. Open tournaments—used sand greens

for more than three decades. Iconic golf course designer, Donald Ross, wouldn't "allow" conversion to grass fairways and greens at Pinehurst until 1935.

The greens at the Telluride Municipal Golf Club were, as Billy "Senior" Mahoney described them, "circular, 20 feet in diameter, all nine of them the same size, and they were flat as a pancake."

"The thing of it is," Senior explained, "most times you had to chip up and over a dirt berm that surrounded the green. And once on it, you took the flat end of a rake and smoothed a path from where the ball



was to the hole. And the hole was always in the center of the green. It was never moved.” The quality of the sand and the player notwithstanding, putting on sand greens must have been (there are still courses with them) a challenge. Without doubt a considerably slower roll than on today’s well-manicured grass putting surfaces.

So many were so anxious to try their hand at golf that The Journal was advised—on several occasions—to point out to its readers that play on the links was for “MEMBERS ONLY!” The newspaper reported “considerable abuse of the club privileges by non-members, who, should they want to play, should pay their 50 cents at the Telluride Hardware company store or the Busy Corner Pharmacy.” It was bad enough, some thought, that non-members played the course for free, but further outrage was editorialized with the curious complaint that “lost balls found on the course were not being returned.”

The excitement over golf in Telluride and on the Western Slope of Colorado during the late 1920s and 30s went beyond just playing the game. In its May 22, 1928 edition, *The Journal* informed its subscribers, “Motor tourists find it convenient nowadays to stop only in towns where there are golf links and they usually remain several days. Statistics show that motorists spend \$17 a day in the towns where they visit.”

Invitations were soon sent out to the golf clubs in Grand Junction, Montrose, and Delta to compete in a “Big Fourth of July Weekend Golf Tournament” at Telluride’s new course. Despite the attraction provided by a loving cup trophy for first prize, a “brassie” (comparable to a 2-wood and used for long shots from tough lies) for second, a pair of golf socks for third, a driver for fourth,

one-half dozen golf balls for fifth, and a golf ball marker for sixth place, just 13 entrants qualified for play. Golfers from Montrose took 1st and 3rd places; a gentleman from Grand Junction finished second. While the turnout may have disappointed some (the rainy weather may have discouraged some from playing) *The Journal* reported, “the visitors were all enthusiastic over the new course and have promised to come to Telluride again.”

Improvements were made every year at Telluride’s golf links. Keeping Bob Alexander’s cattle off of and raking “obstacles” from the fairways appeared to be the two principal groundskeeping tasks. The Journal quoted the club’s president, Charlie Loebnitz, as saying, on May 30, 1930, “the course will be better than ever this year and it is expected that a great many new members will be enrolled.” It’s unclear what the membership numbers were for that year, only that fees were reduced from \$10 to \$5. We do know the tournament staged at the TMGC on June 7, 1931—opening day for the course that year—was one of the largest events ever held there.

Thirty seven players, representing Montrose, Grand Junction, Olathe, Paonia, Fruita, Silverton, Durango, and, of course, Telluride took part in the tourney. *The Journal* reporter counted at least “45 cars seen at the course” and that “traffic

was heavy between there and town all weekend.” Tom Wand, from Paonia, took 1st place honors, shooting a 33, or one under par, on his second round, making him the first golfer ever to shoot par or lower for nine holes at the Telluride course.

The golfers from Paonia took kindly to their invitation to the annual TMGC tournament. For the next two years running two different and apparently very skilled Paonian linksters took home the first prize trophy, shooting what must have been close to course record scores of 75 and 72 (for 18 holes) respectively.

A women’s flight was added to the tournament venue in 1934. Mrs. J.H. Pixler of Grand Junction was the winner with a 51 for nine holes. A video filmed in 1931 by Frank Wilson of the Busy Corner Pharmacy and preserved by Billy Mahoney substantiates that women were not only active golfers at the Telluride course but played from the same tees as the men.

Newspaper accounts of activity at Telluride’s golf course were far and few between as the decade of the 30s moved to its “back nine.” Memberships must have fallen off as dues were reduced from \$2 to \$1 in 1935. The land on which the course was situated had been deeded over to Gio Oberto in the same year as part of debt settlement between he and Bob Alexander, a sign of the times

during the darkest days of the Great Depression. “Joe”—as he was known around town—donated the use of a portion of his considerable holdings on the valley floor to the golf club. And however dire the circumstances became in Telluride during the late 1930s *The San Miguel County Journal* persisted in its optimistic slant on things, calling the Telluride links “one of the sportiest courses to be found anywhere in the country.”

If one can judge what’s important in a town by what one hears on the street corners, then the excitement over playing golf in Telluride during the late 1930s had cooled considerably since 1928. What motion picture was playing at the Nugget Theatre got more press than who played golf at the TMGC. Telluride golfers didn’t give up the game altogether after 1940. Not until the commercial development of Lawson Hill in the early 1990s did the golf course actually “disappear.” But for everyone in Telluride, life and its various diversions took a decided and sudden shift in emphasis following December 7, 1941.

*For Paul O’Rourke, golf is—at least on most occasions—more enjoyable than the proverbial “good walk spoiled.” The game, as it is with life, can sometimes feel like a nearly endless series of miscues and disappointments only to be interrupted by the occasional miracle. **

“IT IS ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO REMEMBER HOW TRAGIC A PLACE THE WORLD IS WHEN ONE IS PLAYING GOLF.”

—Robert W. Lynd, Irish essayist and passionate nationalist