



COURTESY FRIEL GOLF MANAGEMENT

80 Swinging Years

Making and Remaking Coonamessett Golf

BY LES GARRICK

When Arnold Palmer, the reigning US Open and Masters Tournament Champion, launched his drive at the par 72 Coonamessett golf course, the soaring white ball carried the aspirations of club president, Harvey G. Clauson Jr. On that warm, humid August 13 in 1960, in the bucolic village of Hatchville, Palmer, Billy Casper, the 1959 US Open winner, and some regional talent were playing an afternoon exhibition match before a crowd of 2,000. Palmer's team beat

Casper's team in an 18-hole best-ball competition, in which the team member with the lowest score posts the team's score for that hole. Clauson, a large man with big ideas and an ego to match, predicted that this event would establish Clauson's Inn and Country Club, run by his brother Donald Clauson, as one of the leading golfing centers in New England. During the round, on the par 4 365-yard 14th hole, known as "the volcano" because of its elevated green, Clauson

bet Arnold Palmer \$50 that the pro would not par the hole. According to Hatchville resident and Coonamessett golfer William Orsi, who witnessed the event, Palmer then asked Clauson if he would like to double that bet if he made birdie. Clauson agreed, Palmer birdied the hole and Clauson paid him \$100. In 1960 this golf course was an integral and successful part of an inland resort on the northern end of 158-acre Coonamessett Pond. Harvey G. Clauson Sr. had purchased the

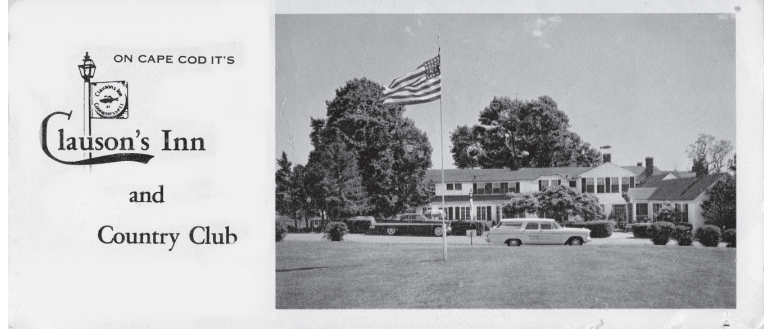


COURTESY GARETH JENNINGS.

Coonamessett Club circa early 1940s. Top: Newly restored hole number 9 showing water hazard.



COURTESY HARVEY G. CLAUSON, JR.



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Clauson's Inn and Country Club brochure cover.

At left: Arnold Palmer (5th from left) and Billy Casper (3rd from left) and others with Harvey G. Clauson, Jr. (6th from left) at an exhibition on August 13, 1960 held at Clauson's Inn and Country Club.

32-year-old resort in June 1957 from the Coonamessett Ranch Company, a land venture of the family circle of the late Charles R. Crane begun in 1916. Mr. Clauson was well known nationally. As recently as 1956 he owned the Blue Hill Country Club, the site of the PGA championship. The purchase, in aggregate about 400 acres, included the golf course and the Coonamessett Inn, as well as a motel on the north side of

According to George Clauson, his father, Harvey Clauson Jr., had earlier paid Palmer and Casper each \$1,000 to appear for this exhibition, but the financially successful pair tried to buy their way out of the engagement. The two pros were held to the commitment and thus the Palmer - Casper exhibition match became the most newsworthy event staged on this course in its then 31-year history.

and foremost the product of beautiful pieces of ground." Tom Doak, "The Anatomy of a Golf Course." 1992.

Coonamessett golf course was laid out in 1928 and 1929, toward the end of the first golf boom of the 20th century; the second was in the 1980s. Aristocrat Devereux Emmet and English immigrant Alfred Horace Tull, both of New York, designed the course. Tull and his local helpers relied on the natural setting, the rolling landscape, with a few hills, overlooking Coonamessett Pond and the abundant stands of pines. Among those pines Tull set the greens, well-guarded with sand traps. Fortunately, the sandy loam drains well but retains enough moisture to support healthy fairway grass.

The first nine holes, which opened in the summer of 1928, started near the Coonamessett Inn, then the only resort building, which also served as a pro-shop. To accommodate the middle-class summer vacationers who weren't able to pay stiff annual dues, the greens fee was a reasonable \$1.50. The second nine holes at Coonamessett were carved out of pine and scrub oak in the fall of 1929 so that play could begin on July 1, 1930. It included a limited fairway irrigation system, which still pumps water from a pipe extending into Coonamessett Pond. The new first hole was adjacent to the new clubhouse, which had a lounge and showers. A new road approached the



COURTESY DONNA JEWETT

Some of the Dupee family golfing, circa 1950s.



COURTESY GARETH JENNINGS

Above: Falmouth Playhouse.

At right: Ruins of the Falmouth Playhouse, which burned on February 28, 1994.



COURTESY DANIEL SMALL

Route 151 and all of the guest cottages. Tragically, Harvey G. Clauson Sr. died as a result of a fire in his home in the Maravista section of Falmouth in May 1958.

Coonamessett Ranch Company Years: 1925 to 1957

"Most great courses are first



COURTESY HARVEY G. CLAUSON, JR.

Harvey G. Clauson, Jr. with friend. The Indian logo was adopted by the Coonamessett Resort in the 1940s, supposedly to reflect the Algonquin word "Coonamessett," which is said to mean "place where large fish are found."



New and current clubhouse exterior.



clubhouse from County Road (Boxberry Hill Road). Later it would also be the entrance to the parking lot for the Coonamessett Club and its successor, the Falmouth Playhouse.

The most picturesque hole, the new 145-yard 9th, demanded calm nerves to shoot from a small, slightly elevated tee, over a wetland between Round Pond and Coonamessett Pond to a sloping green guarded by three sand traps.

At the time a writer for The Falmouth Enterprise said that this was “a truly championship course sporty enough for the man who plays in the low 80s—and yet pleasant and practicable for the novice.”

As the Coonamessett resort matured, nearby farms provided fine produce and dairy. To the west of the resort, until 1935, Brae Burn Farms had its headquarters on the corner of Hatchville and Boxberry Hill roads. Thereafter, Hjalmar Jensen, who purchased 100 acres of Brae Burn land, farmed from 1936 to 1953. His wife, Betty Jensen, operated a bed and breakfast at the farmhouse where some Coonamessett Inn waitstaff lived during the summer.

Despite the abysmal

economic conditions during the 1930s, the Coonamessett Resort was hopping. There was polo every Sunday at 4 PM at the only polo grounds on Cape Cod. And yet, in 1939, the greens fee was only \$2.

Transportation to Hatchville improved in June 1940 with a new three-lane road between North Falmouth and Sandwich Road. As thousands of trainees flocked to the expanded Massachusetts Military



Relocating sand traps to pre-World War II position on Hole 9.

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Rolling landscape and pines of Cape Cod Country Club.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LES GARRICK

At left: New and current clubhouse interior. Building was moved from Coonamessett Pond side to its present location during the Clauson years.

Reservation, recreation for both enlisted personnel and officers became an important social concern as well as a business opportunity. The Coonamessett Resort was ready for them: in February 1941 John O. Crane and his sister Frances Anita Crane, the owners, built 25 cottages along both sides of Boxberry Hill Road. These were rented initially to military officers and later to vacationers. In the

same year they built on golf course land the Coonamessett Club, a barn-like recreation facility with dance floor/skating rink, bowling alleys, game room, dining room and lounge. The club became the new golf course headquarters. Club members would also be able to use the other resort facilities such as golf (including a night driving range), tennis, and dining. Because of its superb location and being

part of an outstanding resort, Coonamessett golf course had the aroma of exclusivity.

During the 1940s, according to Bradford J. Faxon, his father, the late Raymond Faxon, leased the golf course from the Coonamessett Ranch Co. as a business venture. Before that, Ray and his brother George ran caddie camps at Coonamessett and at Woods Hole Golf Club where he later became a member. Faxon, a successful



Aerating the greens with a machine that leaves plugs. This is done to loosen compacted soil to make more room for and increasing oxygen to the roots. It usually takes a couple weeks for the holes to fill in and grow over.

LES GARRICK

financier and public utility executive, is remembered for his generous donations to several Falmouth institutions.

During World War II the Coonamessett golf course sponsored fundraising tournaments to support Army Emergency Relief, a charity to help soldiers and their families in financial need. After the war the Coonamessett Club became a veterans' convalescent and recreation facility and the adjacent golf course was available to aid in the rehabilitation of wounded GIs.

In 1949 the Coonamessett Club was transformed into the air-conditioned, 650-seat Falmouth Playhouse, with a restaurant and a bar. Summer stock talent frequently rubbed shoulders with local diners and many played the course with local golfers. Michael Van Cleve, who has been employed at the course since 1976, recalled a young John Travolta playing the course and David McCallum pitching a tent with his family near the 18th hole.

Post war, new opportunities came to the Coonamessett Golf Club as the Treadway Company, then the resort's manager, lured the high-profile Massachusetts State Open there from 1955 through 1957.

Clauson Years: 1957 to 1977

As demand increased in the 1960s new golf courses were developed near Clauson's Golf Resort. A challenging nine-hole course, played as 18 holes, called the Falcon, and now run by George Clauson, was built on the Massachusetts Military Reservation; the Falmouth Country Club, which is today owned by the Town of Falmouth, began play in 1965; and in 1968 Paul Harney opened an 18-hole, 65-acre "executive course" less than a mile away. Clauson's, however, was different. Many golfing groups booked rooms and cottages and ate and drank at Clauson's Inn. And the cost to golf was relatively low: In 1966 the greens fees were \$5 on weekends and \$4 at other times.

Unlike private courses, the varied nature of Clauson's operation made it difficult to close the course to golfers for three-to-four day state tournaments. They did, however, regularly host several Cape Cod tournaments.

The current clubhouse, a rustic structure, was once a building called "the snackery," used for parties and clambakes on the shore of Coonamessett Pond. It was moved by the Clausons in three parts and reassembled at the site of a fire-damaged clubhouse.

Golf courses are not static. Course managers try to balance beauty with a layout that rewards a good shot and punishes a poor one, while still meeting demanding maintenance requirements. For example, when technology produced better clubs and more lively golf balls, players began to hit longer shots. As a result, hole yardage was lengthened by moving back the tee box. According to George Clauson, head pro from 1971 through 1978, during the Clauson years almost every tee was rebuilt.

The most radical change to the course was made to the iconic par 3 ninth hole. David Mauk, who was course superintendent for four decades, described the change: "The wetland (a bog) in front of the tee was dug out so that a water hazard was created when Coonamessett Pond water rushed into Round Pond until the levels were the same."

The par 5 sixth hole was said by a Falmouth Enterprise reporter to "strike terror in strong men's hearts" because a 20-foot deep gully crossed the fairway about 120 yards from the green. George Clauson explained the player's choice: "The ravine made players decide whether they could hit their second shot over it or lay up, making their third shot that much longer." The ravine was filled in 1963.

Despite those cosmetic changes, the course was welcoming for both men and women. Carolyn Moulton, past president of the Cape Cod Women's Golf League, and women's golf champion at the Coonamessett course from 1991 to 1993, played the course regularly from 1972 through 1993. "The Coonamessett course is very comforting and fits my 10-handicap game well," she recalled.

Gilgun and Doherty Years: 1977 to 1985

In May 1977 M. Elizabeth Clauson, widow of Harvey G. Clauson Sr., sold the resort, including the golf course, to

Steps Realty Trust. Steps sold the golf course in September 1977 to John Gilgun of Woburn and golf professional Ernest Doherty, who renamed the course Cape Cod Country Club. The new owners invested in new machinery and upgraded the antiquated electrical controls in the pump house.

Doherty built a condominium on Boxberry Hill Road near the 16th green in 1982. To keep golf balls from hitting the dwelling he erected a large net and shortened the par four 16th hole to a par 3, so that the course now plays at par 71.

Friel Years: 1985 to present

In 1985 Cape Cod Country Club was sold to Green Meadow Golf Club (Hudson, New Hampshire) Inc., owned by Phil Friel, a New England PGA Hall-of-Famer, a golf course designer and lifelong friend of Ernie Doherty. Friel immediately improved the drainage on the 7th hole and had the golf cart paths paved.

Scott McNeil, general manager of Friel Golf Management Co. Inc., recalled in 2011: "After the Falmouth Playhouse burned in 1994 Phil bought two lots to add parking as well as a practice green and pitching area." After Friel died in 1999 the responsibility for Cape Cod Country Club passed to his children.

"Course maintenance lets me work with Mother Nature, a constant challenge," said Michael Vancleave, speaking to the author.

"First we're going to aerate the greens and make them healthy again; change their watering pattern and over five years get rid of that nasty thatch. Then we are going to make the sand traps the way they were before World War II, and cut some trees that have grown over the fairways and obscured some of the traps. It's going to be attractive and challenging," said Cape Cod Country Club course superintendent Mark E. McEachern in 2007.

McEachern accomplished this makeover by referring to 60-year-old aerial photographs and property maps as well as newspaper articles and advertisements, but without the benefit of the original plans. To date, the greens are healthy, the sand traps have been redone on nine holes and many trees

trimmed.

Scott McNeil commented on their rather ambitious plans in these challenging economic times: "The course is making money but not as much as we would like; as a result, plans for a new irrigation system are on hold."

John Munroe, head professional and general manager, reflected on the past two years: "Golf took a big hit

Golf courses are not static.

Course managers try to balance beauty with a layout that rewards a good shot and punishes a poor one, while still meeting demanding maintenance requirements.

during this deep recession and it is slow to recover, everywhere."

Meanwhile, a more upbeat McNeil said: "We have embarked on an aggressive marketing campaign to attract golfers to what we consider a great golfing experience for the money. Our fees are positioned in the middle of the competition."

Cape Cod Country Club is serene. You can actually hear the birds calling among the pines and the clack of golf club on ball. It is so peaceful because it is surrounded by thousands of acres of open space and conservation lands, and adjacent to a large pond. Even so, this golf course is not isolated historically or ecologically. These 148 acres, adjacent to one of Falmouth's wellheads, are part of a vital green corridor that extends north along the Buzzards Bay Moraine and then eastward to Waquoit Bay. ■
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