

Ravisloe

The Modern Throwback Course

By Neal Kotlarek

In his celebrated poem, Carl Sandburg extolled the virtues of the city of Chicago, referencing its role as hog butcher to the world, tool maker, stacker of wheat and player with railroads. Perhaps Sandburg was referencing the city's love for golf when he wrote about the awesome amount of "shoveling, planning, building, breaking and rebuilding" that some of America's premier golf architects were undertaking in Chicago's suburbs at the time. By the turn of the 20th century, businessmen and women had fallen madly in love with the game as clubs scrambled to accommodate demand.

In fact, players were using railroads to choo-choo from downtown to the south side by the time the great poet's work was published in 1916. Follow the Illinois Central rail line's path and you locate some of the nation's premier original clubs, including Calumet, Flossmoor, Idlewild, Olympia Fields and Ravisloe. As cars were not yet fashionable 100 years ago when these clubs opened, the standard practice to entertain clients was to hop aboard the southbound and arrive at the first tee an hour or so later.

Even through changing times, all of the courses mentioned above – just a few miles apart – share century-old legacies in common. And while all five can still be reached by rail, Ravisloe was the first to shake free of its status as a members-only property and is open to the public. In 2009, the 160-acre property was purchased by prominent veterinary surgeon Dr. Claude Gendreau, who proceeded to invest millions to restore both the clubhouse and the course back to their original elegance.

The original course is believed to have been designed by James Foulis, winner of the second U.S. Open in 1896. William Watson, head professional Robert White, and Aleck Bauer revised the layout in the early teens, when an adjacent parcel was acquired, and master architect Donald Ross did a thorough revision through annual visits from 1917 to 1919.

In 2002, local architect David Esler performed a \$1 million renovation on the course, focusing on restoring the sand bunkers to Ross's original specifications.

Along with improving the grounds and investing heavily in conditioning the course to country club standards, the new owner made major improvements to the club's majestic Spanish Mission-style clubhouse (designed by George Nimmons, who also designed the Olympia Fields clubhouse) to restore its opulence. Every part of the building was renovated, including the ballroom, the bar and grill, and the auxiliary rooms to their original Gilded Age splendor. Indeed, this season one of these rooms is home to indoor golf simulators sponsored by *GolfNow*.

"The primary goal of the clubhouse renovation was to provide our guests with the same experience that the country club members had," director of golf Bob Carpenter said in a mid-January interview. "There is a lot of history in the clubhouse, and we wanted to preserve everything we could as both a historical archive and to honor the club's great legacy."



The 17th green is typical of the Donald Ross look as recreated by David Esler, with a grass-faced bunker and a flat sand base (Photo: Tim Cronin)

Over its illustrious history, prominent players including Harry Vardon and Chick Evans visited the club regularly. Club members included A-listers of Chicago society. Even the club's first pro was a larger than life figure. Born in St. Andrews, Scotland, the aforementioned Robert White served the club from 1902 to 1914. During that time, he founded the long-forgotten Western Professional Golfers' Association, and shortly after moving to New York, became the first president of the PGA of America. White also studied course design and agronomy at the University of Wisconsin from 1902 to 1913. Historians argue that White's specific interest at school might have made him American golf's first turf student and perhaps even the country's first professional superintendent.

Step onto the first tee and you feel as if you've taken two steps back into golf architecture's Golden Age. A wide fairway allows players to swing from their heels yet be vigilant of a bunker poking out into the fairway 250 yards away. Once you reach your ball, marvel at the deviant grass embankment Ross placed at the back end of the hazard to force players to choose a lofted club to evacuate.

The 490-yard third hole may seem like an easy par 5 from the tee, but the hole gets more difficult the closer you get to the flagstick. The pushed-up green is protected by massive sand bunkers, and the putting surface itself has three tiers. Wind up on the wrong one and you can expect a very difficult two-putt.

The sixth hole plays to a short 135 yards. Built by any other designer, the par 3 would seemingly be a juicy birdie opportunity. In fact, yawning bunkers short left and right of a small, rolling green make this one of the toughest pars on the front nine.

The best stretch of holes at Ravisloe are the 11th to 16th. While the front nine with three par 3s serves up multiple birdie opportunities, this grouping serves up a long par 3, three long par 4s and a long par 5 to go with a mid-length par 3. The 226-yard 11th hole is far and away the toughest par 3 on the course. Adding to the hole's difficulty is a bunker just to the left of the green which snags all tee shots steered away from the bunker short and just right of the green.

While players might not like their score on the 550-yard 13th hole, they should enjoy the classic beauty of



the crossing fairway and greenside bunkers on this tough par 5.

The course finishes with a surprisingly short par 4. At 355 yards, the hole allows players a chance to redeem their rounds with a possible birdie. Avoid the deep bunkers protecting this small-sized putting surface.

Ranked by *Golfweek* as the No. 1 classic (pre-1960) public golf course in all of Illinois and the No. 11 overall public course, Ravisloe celebrates the work of Donald Ross and provides a fun, stress-free round of golf due to the limited number of water hazards across the property.

Every round at Ravisloe should end with a tour of the renovated clubhouse and a stop at the clubhouse bar and grill. Golfers making a day out of the trip to Ravisloe are encouraged to enjoy dinner at the course's sister property, the 18-room La Banque Hotel and La Voute Bistro Bar located a few minutes away from the club. Located in downtown Homewood and established in 2015, the bistro serves French-inspired farm-to-table cuisine. Specialties include beef au poivre and a killer double cut bone-in pork rack.

"On occasion," Carpenter said, "we are stopped by players who used to caddie at this club or are former members. To a person, they tell us that they appreciate the work we've done to restore these beautiful grounds to the way they remember them back in the glory days of the club."

The club's long heritage within the community is recognized with special rates and discounts for seniors each Tuesday during the season.

While time marches on, Ravisloe Country Club has found the secret formula to revitalize one of Chicagoland's premier golf experiences. Were he alive today, Donald Ross would most assuredly be proud and fascinated by the efforts taken to bring a country club experience to public golfers from across Chicagoland.



The fifth green is guarded rigorously by bunkering featuring Donald Ross' distinctive grass faces, in this case following David Esler's restoration, hiding much of the putting surface from the fairway. (Photo: Tim Cronin)



The Ravisloe monogram is carved into a hedge on the far side of the pond on the seventh hole, a touch that goes back to its private club days. (Photo: Tim Cronin)