

Teeing Off Down Memory Lane

The Kebo Valley Club boasts a rich golfing tradition, including the saga of William Howard Taft's epic encounter with a sand trap on the seventeenth hole.

By Michael Brosnan

LET'S face it—Maine is not exactly golf country. The playing season is short, and many of Maine's golf courses are nothing more than converted pastures better suited for flocks of sheep than doglegs and sand traps. The professional golf tour pretty much shuns the state. The senior tour and players in golf's version of the minor leagues occasionally make an appearance, but Maine can never expect to play host to anything as important as the U.S. Open.

With all this said, those who play golf here will argue that — at least during the warm, sweet days of summer — Maine is, in fact, an ideal place for the game. The cost of playing is reasonable, one rarely has to wait long to get out on a course, and there are some surprisingly challenging, and scenic, courses open to the public. Without fail, those same enthusiasts will also tell you that one of the top courses in the state is the eighteen-hole course at the Kebo Valley Club in Bar Harbor. *Golf Digest*, which fancies itself an authority on the subject, lists Kebo Valley as one of the fifty best public courses in the entire country. Only one other course in New England — Richter Park, in Danbury, Connecticut — made



BAR HARBOR HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Kebo at the turn of the century was a lively place, with tennis courts, a horse-racing track, a baseball diamond, and a clubhouse grand enough for the ladies and gentlemen drawn to Bar Harbor's burgeoning summer colony.

Frenchman's Bay, are Dorr Mountain and Cadillac Mountain — the latter being the highest point directly on the East Coast. Immediately before you is a lush, green natural amphitheater containing five holes of the course. Standing here, you'll have a hard time imagining anything different, but when the Kebo Valley Club began in 1888, instead of close-cropped fairways and undulating greens there was, in fact, a horse-racing track looping around a baseball diamond and a handful of tennis courts. Golf, then still a novelty sport in this country, didn't come into the picture for another three years.

Bar Harbor, in those days, was a burgeoning

this list. It may also surprise visitors to learn that Kebo, now at the start of its second century, is the eighth-oldest course in the nation, with a colorful history few clubs anywhere can match.

FROM the first tee at Kebo Valley, a short distance from the shops and restaurants of modern-day Bar Harbor, you face south, as you square off for your first shot, down a long, narrow, glacier-carved valley. To the west, rising more than 1,000 feet above

summer colony for wealthy Americans seeking refuge from the summer heat. Like other colonies of its day, Bar Harbor owes its beginnings to artists, in this case to Hudson River School artist Thomas Coles and others who were attracted by the island's beauty and the brilliance of its summertime light. Quick to follow was a bevy of American millionaires who first checked into hotels, and later built their own humble "cottages" — like E.T. Stokesbury's eighty-room showcase with twenty-six handcarved marble fireplaces, twenty-eight bathrooms, and fifty-two telephones, or John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s 102-room immodest summer shanty guarded by a stone fence topped with tiles taken from the Great Wall of China, or Joseph Pulitzer's *Chatwold* cottage and its stone tower of silence where the newspaper magnate — easily annoyed by noise — locked out the world's utterances. Bar Harbor clearly was not a world of understatement, and its golf club reflected this.

The original Kebo clubhouse was a grandiose Shingle-Style building containing a dance hall, a restaurant, and a theater for musical and dramatic events. Here the summercators cut loose in a turn-of-the-century sort of way. At one club party in 1899,

for instance, Mrs. W.E.D. Stokes, noted for her mischievousness, invited seventy guests for dinner. According to Cleveland Amory in his 1948 classic, *The Last of the Great Resorts*, Mrs. Stokes placed in front of each woman a cage containing a pair of live love birds, and, in front of each man, an Indian basket with a protruding yellow elastic ribbon. At the host's request, the men secured these ribbons to the tablecloth with pins of fourteen-carat gold. Then upon her signal, the men threw open the basket lids and in doing so liberated a riot of bullfrogs. The frightened frogs, attached to the other ends of the ribbons, sprang "into the soup plates, the champagne glasses, the laps of ladies... or upon their bare necks and arms." Reports from that evening recall one sly guest, a German count, going about in the hubbub "stealthily collecting the pins."

Extravagant nonsense took place outdoors as well. The old horse track — corresponding more or less with today's second fairway — was more often the site of folly than competition. In one popular event, riders were required to carry mannequins with them, and, in others, to gallop the home stretch while holding up open umbrellas, lighting cigars, or balancing eggs on spoons.



KEBO VALLEY GOLF CLUB

Kebo Valley attracted illustrious players from its inception, and today each of its eighteen tees bears a plaque with the name of a past benefactor or player.

One devotee was President William Howard Taft — pictured here with caddie Howard Clark, Major Archibald Butte (Taft's military advisor), J.T.

Ketterlinus (longtime Kebo Valley Club president), and S.M. Liscomb (Kebo golf pro for a half-century).

EXACTLY who decided to establish a golf course at Kebo is not clear, yet in 1891, Kebo, indeed, had six holes — "golfing grounds" they were called — laid out around the track and baseball diamond. In time, three more would replace the track and its infield, and later, as the game attracted more devotees, a second nine holes were carved out of the landscape.

One of the notable distinctions about Kebo's course today is that on each tee there is a plaque honoring a past benefactor or player — some well known, others simply wealthy golfers. The first hole is named in honor of Charles Pike, president of the club in the 1930s. A native of Chicago and a successful lawyer, banker, and historian, Pike is credited with pulling Kebo through the Depression by the skin of its teeth. In the years after his

death, however, the club continued to stagger. By 1943, with much of the country's attention and manpower turned to Europe and Japan, the membership had dwindled to thirty-two. Although certain members had enough spare change in their pockets to buy the club outright, it was Charles Pike's widow who came through with a \$10,000 gift to defray expenses. She was also the first to

step forward when the club began selling sponsorship of holes for \$1,000 apiece in an effort to raise more capital.

The second hole is named in honor of Dr. Robert Amory, grandfather to author Cleveland Amory and a professor of physiology at Bowdoin Medical School. He was one of the area's first summercators and the club's first president. The third memorializes Shirley Liscomb, who held his position as the club's pro for forty years. The fourth hole — a seemingly easy par three with a large, flat pancake of a green — is named for Sir Harry Oakes. By the time many golfers, playing Kebo for the first time, reach the Oakes hole, they have been lulled into thinking Kebo is not such a difficult course after all. But as Sir Harry Oakes would tell you if he could, life is full of surprises.

Sir Harry is one of the few Bar Harbor summercators and club members who was an actual native of Maine — Sangerville, to be precise. After striking gold in Canada, and becoming one of this country's wealthiest men, he took up residency in the Bahamas and for his philanthropic deeds was dubbed a baronet by King George in 1939. During the thirties he would

spend many a summer in Bar Harbor, playing golf as often as he could. Not bad for a country boy, one might say. But Sir Harry's luck ran out in July of 1943 when he was murdered at his home in Nassau, in the Bahamas. The prime suspect was his son-in-law, Alfred DeMarigny, whom Sir Harry accused more than once of marrying his daughter for money. There was never enough evidence, however, to charge DeMarigny, or anyone else, and the murder to this day remains unsolved. Approach this hole with care.

WHEN you cross Cromwell Harbor Road to the fifth hole — named for Roscoe Jackson, a prime benefactor of the world-renowned Jackson research laboratory in Bar Harbor and one-time president of the now defunct Hudson Motor Company — you are about to learn why Kebo earned its ranking as one of the country's top public courses. The fifth is a 500-yard par five, the first of the three Kebo holes considered among the best in the state. Along the right side runs the tree-lined Kebo Brook, which blossoms out into a small pond guarding the front of the green. With the narrow fairway sloping towards the stream, and a blind approach shot that must carry over a ridge and the pond to the small green, the difficulty here is not so much distance as in avoiding water.

Like the Scottish links it is based on, Kebo's holes are arranged so that you don't circle back to the club house after nine holes, the way you would on most modern American courses. Instead, the first nine holes head down the valley and bring you to the edge of Acadia National Park. As Earl Marshall, a longtime member and now the club's greenskeeper, will tell you, "It's difficult to keep your mind on your game back here." Besides the impressive scenery, you are likely to spot wildlife along these holes in the early and late hours of the day. Deer are particularly plentiful since they are protected from hunters in the park. But, as Marshall will also tell you, it doesn't pay to let your concentration wander. The sixth and seventh are two more deceptive holes that appear easy enough on the card, but punish those who falter. The eighth and ninth holes, both of which have made the list of Maine's best eighteen, on the other hand, don't pretend to be anything but challenging.

These and the following holes (except the eighteenth) are named in honor of some of the

club's more fanatical golfers. Some of them — like William Cochran, Jr., who scored the only eagle (two) on the eighth, and Ernest Kanzler, who won the club championship one year on the sixteenth — were good players. Others — like John T. Dorrance, who invented condensed soup and eventually became president of the Campbell's Soup Company — simply couldn't get enough of the game, despite their athletic shortcomings.

Coming back up valley, you must deal with the likes of the 399-yard par-four thirteenth and the 535-yard par-five fourteenth, with its blind shot to a small green guarded, once again, by water. "People come out here thinking they are going to eat up this course, but they never do," says Earl Marshall. In the unlikely event that a player makes it unscathed to the seventeenth, he might do well to recall

President William Howard Taft's misadventures on this hole in 1911. The seventeenth is not a long hole (358 yards), but it is wily. The Kebo Brook snakes its way along this par four, crossing the fairway twice. And if your first shot doesn't find water or the woods, you face two of the largest sand traps in the state, both of which guard the elevated green whose exact location is somehow difficult to



BAR HARBOR HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Amenities such as tennis courts were unobtrusively set into the carefully landscaped grounds dominated by the peaks of Dorr and Cadillac mountains to the west. Today, the tennis courts are gone and no one knocks balls around the putting green while being serenaded by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, but the scenery is still spectacular.

guage. Although the hole is not named after Taft, it has become known as the Taft hole because here the stout twenty-seventh president of the United States took nearly twenty shots to get out of one of the bunkers.

THE final hole is named in honor of Ford Motor Company's Edsel B. Ford, who had summered in nearby Seal Harbor for many years and belonged to the club. Unlike the ill-fated Ford auto that was also named for him, there is nothing particularly noteworthy about this hole except that it brings one back to the clubhouse — the fourth clubhouse in Kebo's history. Compared to the first two clubhouses, today's building is a rather humble, utilitarian structure, but more in keeping with the current membership. It's not the sort of place where you'd expect to find men in blazers and straw boaters, or women in frilly white dresses swishing in the shade of parasols. No one these days knocks balls around the practice putting green while being serenaded — as they once were at the turn of the century — by the Boston Symphony Orchestra. When the Kebo Valley Club first opened in 1888 it was a private club for the summer residents of Mount

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Desert Island, who demanded exclusivity. A list of club members over the years includes some of the wealthiest and most influential family names in the country. Mainers could caddy or work on the grounds or serve in the clubhouse; tourists couldn't even get past the gate. What helped the club survive, however, was its flexibility. The same impulse that sent the club searching for sponsorship for each hole as a means of raising much-needed capital, would in the 1950s open the door to local golfers and lower membership costs. While still remaining a private club, the board of directors eventually decided to invite the public, especially vacationing golfers, to try their luck.

Today, you can still find the likes of David Rockefeller on the links, but for every BMW in the parking lot there are a half-dozen pickup trucks. Longtime members, like William Fenton, miss the old days when caddies instead of carts assisted the players, and when the rough was deeper and put more of a premium on accuracy than distance. Fenton likes to recall the Kebo stories, such as the time Walter Hagen, one of America's leading golf pros of the twenties and thirties, played Kebo with an Australian trick-shot artist and set the course record (65), or the time the soon-to-be-crowned state amateur champion, Jim Veno, calmly hit his ball out of a discarded paper cup, watched the ball land on the green and drop solidly into the middle of the hole. There's the story of Bill Burns, too, a former course superintendent, who, going into the sixteenth hole, was bound to set a new course record. Unfortunately Burns had gotten a late start and it was 9:00 P.M. when he teed off on the sixteenth in near-total darkness. His friends rushed as many cars to the scene as they could to shed light on the fairway, but to no avail. Burns lost his ball and never finished.

Many of today's members — and most vacationing golfers — don't know much about the club's past. They know only the joy and challenge of playing one of New England's best courses. On occasion, however, they are reminded of those former days — as was one visiting player who hit an errant shot over the eighteenth green and watched gratefully as it bounced off the granite marker erected in memory of Warren Bates, a club benefactor and former member, and rebounded onto the green, only yards from the pin. A reverence for the past clearly enhances the game at the Kebo Valley Club. □

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