

Stonehenge Golf and Country Club  
Tales of a Good Walk  
by Gordon Hickey

When the golfers rolled down the old first fairway at Stonehenge for the first time on that Saturday morning in June 1971, many of them were in their 20s and 30s. Some had recently come home from serving in the military during the war in Vietnam. Some were recently out of school. Many if not most had families, with children in school, and were just beginning to make their way in the world. They were taking a real chance by laying down what was probably a lot of money for them to join such an unproven club so far out in the sticks.

The area, too, was young. Calling Route 60 a turnpike was pretty ambitious for a two-lane road that wandered off into the wilds of Powhatan County and beyond. Huguenot Road was also two lanes and came to a halt at the intersection with Midlothian Turnpike, where there was next to nothing. In 1971 the war was just beginning to wind down, Linwood Holton was governor, Richard Nixon was president, the Watergate burglary was a year away, and American Pie was a hit.

Jim Matsey was five or six groups back from the first foursome on opening day. He had earlier signed up as a founding Member of the Club, with real estate developer Bob Cornell, standing on the porch of an old farmhouse that stood close by the current clubhouse. The Members had intended the two-story farmhouse to be the clubhouse but it was struck by lightning and burned down in August 1970. The pool and a couple of tennis courts had opened Memorial Day 1970, but the course was still under construction.

Matsey, his wife Lorraine and their three children came from Pittsburg and bought a house in Stonehenge in 1969, when crews had just started to grade the golf course. "Since we were living on a golf course, I became a golfer," he said. His two shares cost \$1,000, and he paid another \$4,000 to be a founding Member. He got to be pretty good at golf over the years and twice won the Senior Club Championship.

"Everybody knew each other back then." Matsey estimated about 80 percent of the Stonehenge membership was from the subdivision. He recalls them getting together for pool parties, where everybody would bring food to share. "Initially, it was a family club," centered on the pool. "It seemed like there were parties then that everybody went to."

Founding Members Patsy and Spencer Elmore moved into their new home on the no. 12 fairway in 1981. The subdivision was still being developed when they joined the Club. "Spencer said he thought it was going to be a good course," she said.

Elmore said it was common on Friday nights for couples to hire babysitters and go to the clubhouse to get together with the Members. "At night, it was basically an adult club. It has become more family oriented over the years."

Patsy Elmore recalled that most of the property on which Stonehenge now sits was owned by Leroy Ford. He lived near the no. 12 fairway, had a huge garden and hunted in the nearby forests and fields that he still owned.

She also recalled that in the early year, Stonehenge “Was basically a men’s golf course... Women were not allowed on the course on Saturdays and Sundays.”

That situation was not unusual on golf courses everywhere. But things changed over the years, and, according to Elmore, “Once the ladies’ groups got organized in the 1980s, they had more to say about it.” Today, the number of women playing golf on any given day rivals the number of men.

Toby Heitzler was also there that first day, which was delayed a week to the second week in June by a rainout. He still has two opening day balls and a deck of cards the players received as a gift. He played 27 holes that day.

He moved to the area in November 1970 and met Cornell, of Bonarco, which had taken over the country club from Bon Air Realty, which had created the subdivision. Cornell hired Ed Ault, who designed Salisbury, Mill Quarter and other courses, to be the course architect. Heitzler, who grew up in Danville, wanted to play golf near his new home. He looked at Salisbury, but Stonehenge was just opening. “There was no Initiation Fee and I could get in on the ground floor,” he said. So he joined. He had to finance the \$1,000 for two shares that he bought in February 1971. Heitzler joined along with friends that he worked with. He was Member number 187. At the time he was single and a B Member. He paid \$17.50 a month in dues.

The course was much more isolated then. Between the no. 8 hole and Midlothian Turnpike, for example, there was nothing but forest. “People used to hunt turkeys there while we played golf,” Heitzler said.

The late lamented original first hole was a 420-yard dogleg right that started where the current driving range is located. Heitzler and Matsey, independently, both called it “the best starting hole in the city.”

“The first Member-guest was a great tournament,” Heitzler said. There was a waiting list to get in and dinner was at Meadowbrook Country Club. Stonehenge had a small tennis pro shop, which was not much more than a shed, and the golf pro shop. The clubhouse had not yet been built.

After the clubhouse was built in the mid-1970s –paid for by the Members and expanded in 1991– the manager brought in Mike Felker to be the pro. He was in the early line of pros that included Todd Dougherty, Mike Lesniak, Willie Maples, Tommy Amidon, Lou Hamilton, Ronnie Kelly and Harry Griffin. Combined, they had the job for the first 20 years the Club existed. The current pro, Richard Smith, has been at Stonehenge for 25 years.

Walter Hawthorne joined the Club in 1974. He was living off Rt. 60 at the time and a friend, Sam Finch, asked him to join. “I was 34 with two kids. You gotta be kidding me,” he recalled

thinking. But he joined as an F Member. He received eight shares for \$4,000. Under that deal, the F (founding) Members were promised that they would not pay monthly dues. There were 60 original F Members. Another 30 were added in 1975 or 1976, converted from existing regular, or A Members, because the Club was struggling and needed money.

Hawthorne and his family moved into the Stonehenge subdivision in 1977. He and the other early Members all recall the rock-picking parties, where groups were assigned a fairway they would walk the length of and pick up rocks. Hawthorne describes the early Club as an informal gathering place. His son was a swimmer and his daughter a swimmer and diver, for example. "I can remember judging the diving competition and I didn't know squat about diving," he said, laughing. "There were so few people."

When one talks to the older Members, a few names keep coming up. One is Bob Cornell, who was the owner before the Members bought the Club in the mid-1970s. "He was the guru of Stonehenge," Hawthorne said.

Another is Leroy Ford, whom they all call "Mr. Ford." He was elderly, maybe in his 90s, had lost an arm in some kind of accident, and had a hook. "I can remember seeing him on the lake cutting weeds," Hawthorne said. He wasn't a Member of Stonehenge, but whenever there was a function at the Club, Mr. Ford was invited. "He felt it was his baby before the golf course was even built." He had also related a story about a fire in a coal mine located just behind the first green. Mr. Ford said water from Falling Creek was diverted to flood the mine and put out the fire. The Club is still using water from that flooded mine to water the course.

Chuck Reid joined the Club in 1982 to play tennis. He said that when he bought his house the previous owner gave him two shares of stock in Stonehenge. There were four courts then and "Some neighbors were complaining because they had cleared land for two more courts," Reid said.

There was no outdoor gazebo and only a small tennis pro shop with no restroom. Maintenance was also a do-it-yourself operation, much like the golf course. "We had to squeegee off the course after rain. There were also no wind screens, which they finally bought. We had to put them up ourselves."

Like golf and the pool, tennis was a neighborhood, family affair. There were bring-your-own picnics. "Friday night was couples," Reid said, much like the twilight couples golfers now play on Friday nights. "We'd be down there till midnight. It was a lot of fun."

Reid played tennis almost exclusively for 12 years. But when he was getting ready to retire he paid \$2,000 to upgrade his membership from Social to Full and has been an avid golfer ever since.

Stonehenge, in its early years, often struggled to pay the bills. By the 1990s, the struggle was getting pretty serious. The Club wanted to charge the F Members monthly dues but they argued that they had paid more up-front for their memberships and had also helped pay for the clubhouse. The argument led to a lawsuit.

More than 50 Members threw in \$600 each and hired the Mays and Valentine law firm to sue the Club. In 1992, the judge decided that the Club could not charge the F Members monthly dues.

By 1995, the Club's financial problems were getting even more dire. "We were hurting for membership," Heitzler said. The board of directors voted to look for a company to run the Club and entered into a lease and management agreement with ClubCorp. Members were asked to vote on the agreement, which was approved over the objections of a large minority who thought the Club, which had over \$400,000 in the bank at the time, could weather the financial storm and keep local control.

The agreement with ClubCorp, effective in May 1995, provided that:

- ClubCorp would manage the Club and be responsible for all costs and expenses for the next 49 years
- ClubCorp would spend \$1.35 million for capital improvements within the next three years, including improvements to the irrigation system, cart paths, the pool and course drainage
- ClubCorp would assume \$1.1 million in debt, which was owed for the clubhouse expansion
- ClubCorp would spend 7 percent of annual gross receipts on capital improvements
- Golf Membership would be limited to 525 Members
- Monthly dues would not exceed the Consumer Price Index by 2 percent each year
- F Member dues would be frozen at \$50 a month for life
- There would be no assessments or food minimum, which had been \$50 a month
- The course would be closed on Mondays for nonmember golf outings

The vote from the F Members, each of whom had eight shares, was nearly unanimous in favor of the agreement with ClubCorp. Though they had been paying no dues at all until then, they were paying yearly assessments of \$200. The F Members' dues went up to \$50 a month, but no Members have ever again had to pay assessments.

At the time the agreement was signed, there were 13 membership classes. The next year, 1996, all the Golf Membership classes were stricken, except F Members.

After that agreement was signed, ClubCorp decided to expand the driving range where the original first fairway was located. Matsey said they also put out flyers inviting the public to use the driving range, for a fee. "We had to stop that," he said.

Aside from that first fairway, the course has remained pretty much as designed, though there have been many small changes over the years. The greens have also remained the same size. Older Members recall that with the exception of Falling Creek, which crosses holes no. 3 and 7, and runs along no. 6 and 11, it was usually possible to step across most of the other water hazards. The holes were all designed so that golfers can go at the greens on the par 4s from the center of the fairways without having to hit over a bunker. The cannon was added to the bunker on hole no. 4 after it was given to the Club.

There was an old mine shaft between the senior's and lady's tee boxes on hole no. 5 that caved in at one point and had to be refilled. There was also a small stream or ditch below the no. 5 tee box.

The small stream on the no. 6 hole at about 250 yards went all the way across the fairway and there was another large tree near the existing oak on the right that blocked part of the fairway.

On the no. 8 hole, there was a bunker where the trees are on the right and a small stand of trees just across the pond. A second bunker was added later after the trees were removed. The tall netting was added along the right side of hole no. 8 to keep golf balls out of the swimming pool.

The no. 9 hole was a par 4 for women, with the tee box behind the men's blue tees. That made the course a par 73 for women.

There was a large tree at the left side of the bottom of the no. 10 fairway, which was only recently removed and which changed the nature of the hole. There also is a little-known cemetery to the left of the no. 10 fairway, just below the tee box.

The no. 11 hole was heavily forested on the right. The pond was added by ClubCorp.

On hole no. 14, a bunker was put in about 100 yards from the green, replacing a large willow tree. Older Members recall ice skating on the pond that extended farther down the right side of the fairway.

The creeks on holes no. 12, 16 and 17 started to rise and grow after development went in along Midlothian Turnpike and Huguenot Road. Chesterfield County then put in riprap to mitigate the runoff on those holes.

The Senior Men's Golf Association was organized in 1988 when, as a brief history of the group puts it: "A sufficient number of our people gave up the work process in favor of retirement." The group was largely made up of the same early Members who had always made contributions to the Club. The Senior Women's Golf Association soon followed.

Stonehenge has always been a great course to walk, which was a draw to the Korean membership that started to balloon in the early 2000s. Kyong Kim and Chong Pak both joined when there were about 10 Korean families at Stonehenge. Pak said he'd heard that, "this course is pretty nice because it's walkable. A lot of Koreans, they like exercise."

Kim said golf is very popular in Korea, but extremely expensive. He and Pak said it can cost as much as \$3 million to join a club there, with dues as high as \$1 million a year. The waiting list to play can be months long and a round of golf can cost \$400.

So when Koreans immigrated to the Richmond area, worked hard and like anyone else reached a point where they could afford to join a club, they heard about Stonehenge from their friends. "I

told everyone, it's a good course and the Members are good," Kim said. As of 2018, there are about 130 Korean Members.

As the long lease with ClubCorp approaches its halfway point, Stonehenge is thriving. Work on a number of bridges that cross what, over the years, have widened into significant streams was completed in 2018. Improvements to landscaping around the new bridges, at the clubhouse and all across the golf course are ongoing. Tennis courts have been resurfaced.

Perhaps the biggest change in recent years occurred in early 2019 when the clubhouse was again redesigned to increase the size of the kitchen and the bar area of the grill.

Mark Twain has been credited, or blamed, for the famous quote: "Golf is a good walk spoiled." He, obviously, never played Stonehenge and watched the deer canter by, or the hawks soaring over head, or the bluegills gather in the creek next to the no. 14 tee box.

The Ed Ault design has held up nicely over the years. The fairways are wide and the greens large and accessible. At Stonehenge, golf is a good walk.