

The MetGolfer

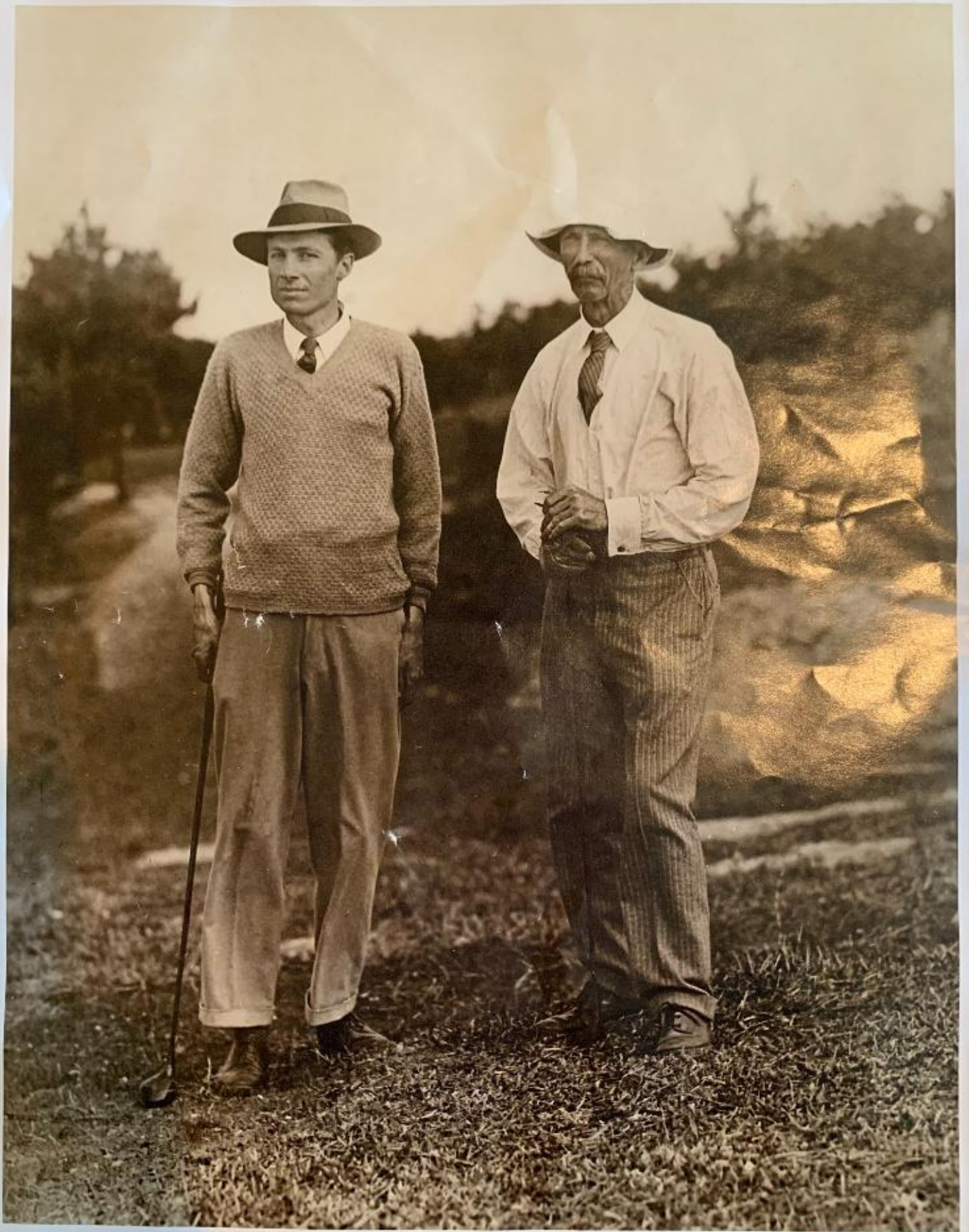
THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE METROPOLITAN GOLF ASSOCIATION

MGAGOLF.ORG

Straight Shooter

Renowned Leatherstocking
Golf Course architect
Devereux Emmet:
Tough course & tough talk
by Evan Rothman

REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION OF THE MET GOLFER, OCTOBER, 2010.



Straight Shooter

Golden Age golf architect Devereux Emmet favored tough courses—and tough talk **BY EVAN ROTHMAN**

In 2006, Mark Fine and Scott Witter paid their first visit to Copake Country Club, a well-liked 1921 course whose modest reputation didn't extend beyond New York's sparsely populated Columbia County, just south of Albany. The club's new owners were considering a renovation and had summoned the design team to the layout. As Fine walked the rolling property, he sensed something special about the course.

"We could see it was done by someone who knew what he was doing, not just some farmer who'd planted seed and put holes in the ground," Fine said. "It had character and interest, the routing and bunkering was clever, and the green sites were typical of what you'd see from a noteworthy designer. It had evolved in not such a great manner, but it was a gem."

Intrigued, Fine began to do some historical research and talked to the club's old-timers on subsequent visits. He came to conclude "with 90 percent certainty" that Copake was a lost Devereux Emmet design. This news served to excite only a handful of course architect aficionados. This says less about Emmet's talents than his underappreciated legacy.

If he is not quite a lost designer, the man who built more than 160 courses in his lifetime is far less renowned than his creations. His credits include original designs and redesigns of many Met Area classics (*see sidebar, page 44*)

and four major championship sites, including Garden City Golf Club on Long Island and Congressional Country Club in Bethesda, Md. The names of his friends C.B. Macdonald and Seth Raynor are hallowed; Devereux Emmet's is often misspelled—it was commonly rendered as "Devereaux" or "Emmett" in the newspapers of the day.

That's a shame, especially given the character of the man himself. Emmet was a New York blueblood who tilted against blueblood institutions. A 139-pound wisp of a man with a healthy mustache, Emmet was a formidable presence on the written page, a bare-knuckled brawler in getting his point across. And he was prescient, not only about course design but also his own work: He knew much of it wouldn't survive intact.

...

Emmet was born in Pelham, N.Y., on December 11, 1861. He was the great-grandson of the Irish patriot and New York State

Devereux Emmet (at right, with his son) was one of the most prolific and talented golf architects of the early 20th century.

Copake Country Club in the Hudson Valley is now suspected to be the work of Emmet.

Attorney General Thomas Addis Emmet; the Emmet family was listed in Ward McAllister's *First Forty Families in America*. He graduated from the Arts school of Columbia College in 1883 and from Columbia Law School in 1885, yet spent the next four years farming in Otsego County, N.Y. "If I did not learn anything else at the Law School, I learned to avoid litigation," he once wrote. He married Ella Batavia Smith, niece of the pioneering retailer and developer A.T. Stewart. The *New York Times* wedding announcement noted that about 500 guests attended the afternoon reception, and that the couple was planning a three-week honeymoon.

They would return to Emmet's 17th-century Long Island estate, Sherrewogue. Emmet's new brother-in-law was Stanford White—White had married Ella's sister Bessie—and in 1895 the famous (and later infamous) architect remodeled and enlarged the Emmets' sprawling farmhouse overlooking Stony Brook Harbor. Emmet's golfing circle was equally rarified: His friendship with C.B. Macdonald would play a key role in Macdonald's seminal National Golf Links of America, where Emmet was a founding member.

Emmet led a privileged Gilded Age life, filled with golf, fox hunting, training hounds, overseas travel, farming and gardening. Still, he was disinclined to take the easy road in all things golf. A November 30, 1897, *Times* sports brief, "Keene Beats Emmet," is the first of many such examples. The tournament



committee of the Red Spring Cup declared Emmet the champion after a scheduling conflict kept his finals opponent, Foxhall Keene, from making their previously arranged match; "[Emmet] refused to accept it on those conditions," and lost on the first playoff hole of the rescheduled match two weeks later.

Emmet's earliest documented foray into design was the Island Golf Links in 1897. He laid out the course in conjunction with George L. Hubbell, president of the Garden City Company, the organization from which Emmet ultimately retired as vice president. According to H.B. Martin's *50 Years of American Golf*, Hubbell was "obsessed with the idea that golf would help build the community." Island's nine holes, set on ideal golf course turf, cost only \$1,750 to build. In 1899, Emmet completed another nine holes and the course, now the Garden City Golf Club, was selected to host the first MGA championship—the Met Amateur—that same year. The U.S. Amateur followed in 1900 and the U.S. Open in 1902.

Despite this championship pedigree, founding Garden City member Walter Travis later revised the layout in the wake of his pointed critique in *The American Golfer*. Perhaps harder to fathom in our glad-handing times is that Emmet, ever outspoken, had himself already criticized Garden City in print.

"It is my opinion that most of our courses are too wide. I am sure that the Garden City course is," Emmet wrote in the February 1902 issue of *Golf*. "The Garden City course is fairly ruined every year by the mowing of the rough side hazard." He was an equal-opportunity offender, publicly taking to task the maintenance practices of other courses he hadn't designed, including Nassau Country Club (which he was later hired to re-work) and Shinnecock Hills (deemed "very foolish to go to the expense of sodding").

Emmet Unfiltered

A sampling of the outspoken designer's most quotable comments:

On Wide-Open Courses: "Too much has been done for the swiper. He has far too much latitude at present."

On Easy Courses: "I know of courses about New York where the greens are so unprotected that they can be approached with an umbrella handle as a weapon, with entire impunity."

On Difficult Courses: "Shall it be said of us American golfers that we cannot stomach the rigors of the ancient game, and are so careful about losing a ball that we take all the sting out of our links? Let us be careful that in doing so we do not take all of the sting out of our game."

On Bunkering: "Every ball that enters a bunker should stop there, and it should only require one good stroke to get it out."

On Rough: "The rough ground bordering the fair green should be of such a nature that a player can get out of it but a short distance with a niblick."

On Short-Sighted Green Maintenance: "A clamor arises for the motor mower to iron it out as smooth as a billiard table."

On Modern Architecture: "Nowadays a golf architect is expected to create a miniature Switzerland on a piece of real estate as flat as Sheephead Bay Race Course—with the finance committee hailing from Missouri. Nothing is considered impossible anymore on a golf course."

