

OAKWOODS HISTORY...The Early Years...1954-1962

The Oakwoods Country Club story is one of a small town golf club, passion for golf, community activism, and painstaking construction in the beautiful North Carolina foothills. As Herb Graffis, the editor of Chicago-based *Golfdom - The Business Journal of Golf* said in his October 1957 article, "It's a model worth studying, and an excellent case history in the organization, financing, and construction of a golf club." Graffis further commented, "for groups that can see their way to invest about \$100,000 in a course, a study of how Oakwoods came into existence may offer a convenient solution to the detailed and often complicated matter of getting an undertaking such as this off the ground, or, at least, it should do away with false starts. After five years, the Oakwoods club is not only debt free but is built on such a solid foundation that there is no need for any wide scale improvements."

Oakwood's long history begins in the autumn of 1952 when a number of prominent Wilkes County citizens interested in building a golf course for the people of Wilkes met in the Forest Hills home of Pat M. Williams, Jr. and his wife Dottie. At this meeting approximately \$100,000 was pledged toward the construction of a course. Additionally, a decision was made to employ widely known golf architects Robert Trent Jones of New York City, and J.B. McGovern of Philadelphia to survey possible development sites. Soon after the initial meeting of interested parties at the Williams' home, the group was initially organized as the Wilkes Country Club at a public meeting at the North Wilkesboro Town Hall in December, 1952. Directors appointed to the Board of this organizational group were Henry L. Moore, E. F. Gardner, Boyd Stout, Richard G. (Rich) Finley, Richard B. Johnston, Dr. J.H. McNeil, Max Ferree, J.R. Hix, W. Blair Gwyn, Russell Gray, Jr., Mrs. Worth E. Tomlinson, Mrs. George Weibel, Robert R. Smoak, W. O. Absher, C. J. (Jack) Swofford, Russell G. Hodges, J. D. Moore, Jr., W. K. Sturdivant, Pat M. Williams, Jr., and Watson Brame. The officers elected at this meeting, Henry L. Moore, President, Pat M. Williams, Jr, First Vice-President, Richard B. Johnston, Second Vice-president, Russell G. Hodges, Secretary; and W. Blair Gwyn, treasurer were later also named as officers on the charter of incorporation when Wilkes Country Club was formally incorporated February 16, 1953, with \$88,000 in stock subscriptions.

Architects Jones and McGovern selected a building site on the Oakwoods - Moravian Falls Road four miles south of North Wilkesboro, near what was then the Oakwoods post office. Through purchase and the execution of options, the organizers acquired 148 acres of land at the base of the Brushy Mountains ideal for a beautiful and challenging course. Pat Williams, Sr. donated the bulk of the property to the group, enough land for the first nine holes. He later donated 27 additional acres so there would be

plenty of land available for the club to expand if it wished. Mr. Williams, Sr. retained approximately half of his existing land and sold off a number of building lots, the only revenue he gained in the development of the golf course. Additional tracts, not on the golf course but northwest of the club house and west of hole #1 (the par 3), were obtained from Ruben G. Anderson and J. V. Reins. The original investment in this land was \$11,000. The club later sold this property as residential lots. The club also sold lots on the #3 fairway to Bill Benson, Sr, W. J. Brame, Ed Day and possibly others. Income from the sale of these lots was used to partially fund construction of a clubhouse and to pay down debt.

Among the organizational group were several bankers who devised an ingenious and successful approach to raising capital for the club's construction. They suggested that potential members could borrow the initiation fee and dues from the bank, repaying in the same way as with any standard loan. The Graffis article in *Golfdom* states, "Later, it was agreed, that the fees and dues did not have to be collected in their entirety at the time a person joined the club, but could be paid off under a kind of subscription arrangement. A call for these funds went out only when construction costs caught up with what was left in the treasury. In the estimation of one North Wilkesboro citizen who had belonged to other clubs in his day, the Oakwoods system of extracting fees and dues was the most painless one he had run into."

Construction of the original nine-hole course and clubhouse began in early spring 1953 with Arthur Ham, a venerable Scot architect, serving as course designer, James M. Parks of Union Grove as general contractor, and Newell Baker as OCC's first golf pro. Mr. Baker, before coming to OCC, was the teaching professional at Blowing Rock Country Club and later head club professional at Cedarbrook Country Club in Elkin. Born in England, Arthur Ham had by this point in his career designed many noted courses in the United States, New Zealand, and Australia. After moving from New Zealand to Michigan in the mid 1920's, he designed Arbor Hills CC among others in Michigan. Semi-retiring from Michigan to the warmer climate in Mt. Airy, NC, Mr. Ham's depth of experience served the Wilkes project well. There was some opposition at first to Ham's iconoclastic methods of stripping in traps and contouring greens, but Oakwoods members are thankful that his design decisions prevailed as OCC is today one of the most beautiful and challenging courses in the foothills. What Mother Nature didn't provide, Arthur Ham did. In an August 9, 1953 article in the Winston-Salem Journal and Sentinel written by sports editor Frank Spencer, OCC Treasurer Blair Gwyn was quoted as saying, "About 30 golfers from here go to Morganton regularly to play, and that's a trip of 100 miles. Many of us have played regularly at Blowing Rock, another 100-mile trip. We have about 60 members in our new club now, and when it is completed this list will swell. A lot of us like golf and because of the great distance necessary to play a round it has

prevented many would-be golfers of North Wilkesboro and Wilkesboro from becoming regular golfers.”
How right he was!

Wilkes Country Club was renamed Oakwoods Country Club in January of 1954 and opened for play during that month. Henry L. Moore was elected the first President of Oakwoods Country Club, Mrs. Doris B. Brown, Vice-President, Robert R. Smoak, Secretary, and W. Blair Gwyn, Treasurer. Elected to the Board of Governors were Ralph Buchan, Richard Johnston, Pat M. Williams, Jr., Mrs. Frances Weibel, J.D. Moore, Boyd Stout, Dr. J.H. McNeil, Russell Gray, Jr., C.J. (Jack) Swofford, and Richard G. (Rich) Finley. The 3,270 yard course was “in good shape for playing,” according to golf professional, Newell Baker. The cost to join the club at this time was an initiation fee of \$30 and annual dues of \$96 for a resident family membership, \$48 for a resident family membership with house privileges only, \$72 for resident individual male membership, \$36 for a resident individual male membership with house privileges only, \$36 for a resident individual female membership, \$48 for a non-resident family membership, and \$36 for a non-resident individual male membership. Club President Henry Moore was quoted as saying “I would like to stress that every citizen in Wilkes County who is interested in the club is urged to participate. There has apparently been a misunderstanding by some that club membership is being restricted to those who have been contacted by the membership committee. This is not true. Voluntary applications by people who have not been approached will be most welcome.” Mr. Moore went on to say “signs will be erected shortly, directing Sunday drivers to the site. The road which turns into the property is 1.5 miles west of Oakwoods Post Office on the road from Oakwoods to Moravian Falls. The road has already been graded and graveled, and the public is invited to visit the property at any time to visit.” Watson Brame, one of the club’s original directors, used his significant influence with the North Carolina State Department of Transportation in to accelerate the grading, graveled and eventually the paving of the seemingly always muddy Country Club Rd between Brushy Mountain Road and Hwy 16/18. This was essential to attracting golfers to the new course.

Golf pro-superintendent Baker was quoted as observing: “The Oakwoods builders made all their dollars work when it came to building a clubhouse.” The original structure was 110 feet wide by 32 feet in depth, with a wing measuring 50 feet by 32 feet. It housed clubhouse facilities, a small pro shop and four room living quarters for Baker. It was the brainchild of a local furniture designer who was assisted by a few of the club’s members with an architectural flair. The contractor erected the structure on a cost-plus basis then agreed to cut his fee in half and take stock in exchange. Several local manufacturers donated furniture and a local appliance dealer outfitted the kitchen free of charge. Lockers were bought and donated to the club by members who received five years free locker rent in payment. With these

various contributions and donations, the original clubhouse complex was built for only \$30,000. In its early years, judging from Newell Baker's handicap records, OCC experienced a great deal of play with 135 of the 160 members being active golfers. More than 40 of the members played to handicaps in the 4 – 12 range. The greens at Oakwoods were originally planted in Bermuda, but in 1957 Baker experimented with C-1 and C-19 mixed bent with reportedly very good results. OCC has been widely celebrated throughout its history for the quality of its greens. In the winter months, Seaside, Astoria and Highland bents were substituted for the original rye in the fairways.