

PineStraw

Open
Here

The Art & Soul of the Sandhills

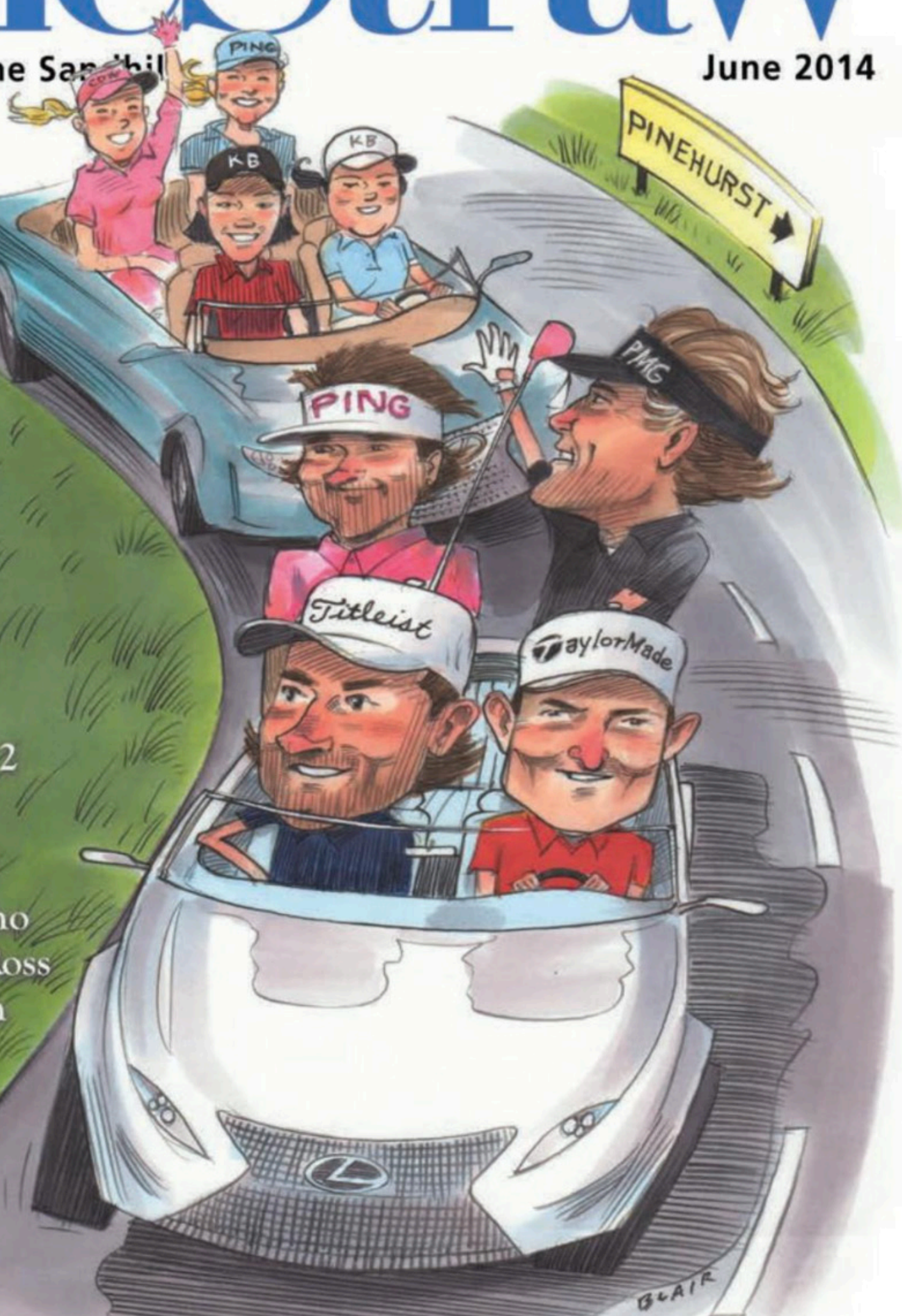
June 2014

All Roads Lead to Pinehurst

The 2014 U.S. Open
Championships
Come to the Sandhills

How Pinehurst No. 2
Was Nearly Lost —
and Later Found

PLUS, The Man Who
Would Be Donald Ross
— and His Forgotten
Masterpiece



Pants That Just Say Pinehurst • Peter Millar Comes of Age • My Father's Golf Clubs

Donald Ross' Lost Masterpiece

Twenty miles due east of Pinehurst No. 2, Overhills Golf Course — once an exclusive retreat — lies buried beneath time and pine straw



BY GAYVIN POWERS

Once upon a time, Pinehurst No. 2 was not the only American golf course that reminded some of the sandy links along old Dornoch, Scotland; there also existed an exclusive Sandhills course naturally situated among the pines called Overhills. Legendary course designer Donald Ross crafted both courses with equal promise. Yet each course was fated very different futures.

This month, while all eyes are on Pinehurst No. 2 for the Men's and Women's U.S. Open, twenty miles west of it, Overhills lies forgotten — a relic in history. One of golf's historical gems, Overhills is no longer playable. Far from its original purpose, the once exemplary course would no longer be recognizable to Scottish-bred Ross, who was a protégé of Old Tom Morris at St. Andrews.

Ross completed his Pinehurst masterpiece in 1907, and later in life he called it, "the fairest test of championship golf I have ever designed."

The success story of No. 2 is a drastic comparison to Ross' forgotten links at

Overhills, which has become overgrown in foliage and memory — lost to bygone eras. However, Overhills didn't start out that way.

In 1916, Ross completed the golf course at Overhills, an elite hunting club outside Fayetteville, for wealthy Northern industrialists and bankers such as Percy Rockefeller, George Herbert Walker, Averell Harriman, Skull and Bones members from Yale, and others.

Unlike most of his projects, where Ross was limited by acreage and budget, the designer was given carte blanche in developing the Overhills course.

Rockefeller was quoted as communicating to Ross, "Here, Mr. Ross, you have 3,500 acres of property to choose from. I want a golf course that will have no superior — you are the doctor and do anything you want to — and do not consider expense when making your plans, you have an absolutely free hand."

The result led reviewers of the course to declare it better than Pinehurst courses, and a 1917 article in *Golf Illustrated* described it as "one of the very finest golf courses in the country."

Ross' creation became the spirit of Overhills, anchoring cottages and the clubhouse by the ninth and eighteenth greens. The course provided a serene setting that complemented the natural environment prevailing throughout Overhills.

Kim Elliman (a Rockefeller) expressed in *Overhills Oral History* that "(The golf course) was a backdrop; it was everyone's viewshed."

By the 1920s, Pinehurst No. 2 remained open to resort guests while only a



OVERHILLS COUNTRY CLUB GOLF COURSE

NO	YARDS	PAR	BOGY
1- 450.7	YARDS	5	5
2- 375.4	"	4	5
3- 207.7	"	4	4
4- 509.5	"	5	6
5- 171.6	"	3	3
6- 417.9	"	4	5
7- 384.0	"	4	5
8- 360.5	"	4	4
9- 156.5	"	3	3
3033.6		36	40

NO	YARDS	PAR	BOGY
10- 422.7	YARDS	4	5
11- 510.5	"	5	6
12- 411.2	"	4	5
13- 337.7	"	4	4
14- 146.3	"	4	4
15- 585.9	"	5	6
16- 395.1	"	4	5
17- 371.2	"	4	5
18- 330.4	"	4	4
3511.0		38	44

PAR FOR 18 HOLES : 74
BOGY : 18 : 84

select few within the social elite received an invitation to play on the exclusive, private course at Overhills. Due to the few visitors, guests and workers often commented that playing golf at Overhills was similar to having a masterfully designed golf course all to one's self.

The Rockefellers, Harrimans and other families only visited Overhills a few times a year, but when they did come, hunting and horseback riding took precedence over golf. The sandy Scottish game was usually played in the afternoon — after riding. Visitors would sometimes play golf with workers in order to make a foursome or for added company on the quiet and secluded property.

Surrounded by 11,000 acres of longleaf pines, dogwoods, birds and silence, the seclusion was vast and could make a person feel he or she was in a different world, even though the retreat was hiding in plain sight off Vass Road. There was an intimate, private connection with the property, where nature was heralded in high regard. Its inception was, after all, a hunting retreat, and that set the standard — with the exception of hunts that were conducted with the utmost decorum and proper attire. The rest of activities were relaxed and people would dress down. Even Isabel Rockefeller, Percy's wife, insisted on greeting guests and going into town in a house dress. In terms of golf, a relaxed dress code along with lack of tee times at Overhills were in contrast with world class golf courses of the times. An Overhills golfer could start and stop playing on a whim; Rockefeller grandchildren often enjoyed playing the links in bare feet — with the exception of when a snake was found in a sand bunker.

One of the more exciting events surrounding the Overhills golf course was the

annual re-enactment of a Civil War battle. Ronny Holmes, who grew up at the secluded retreat, mentions in *Overhills Oral History* that the enactment, located near a large bunker was "elaborate. They had cannons going off; firecrackers would be the cannons . . . Those boys would put on a pretty good show . . . But the Yankees always won."

None of the Overhills greens were more appreciated than those at the fifth and ninth holes. Guests and workers obsessed at getting a hole-in-one on number 9 — a feat that only happened once. While the Rockefellers drank their Earl Grey at the fifth hole, listening to the birds and watching the sunset, they admired the view highlighting the simple formations Ross had painstakingly sculpted along the course.

In order to create this effect, in Ross' day, machines weren't around to do the heavy lifting, remove stones or cut centuries of deeply rooted trees; it was no simple task to create Pinehurst No. 2 or Overhills — both were crafted by hand. To achieve this, Ross' ethical, no-nonsense upbringing influenced his selection of workers.

The Ross family and Donald J. Ross LLC share letters that Ross wrote to Lillian, his daughter, during her youth. In one correspondence in May, 1933, Ross wrote:

"If I had my way I wouldn't have anyone employed in Pinehurst who didn't do some work in community service . . . I like and appreciate honest, helpful service and dislike those would-be workers who want only the cream from other people's efforts . . ."

Across the pines, a sense of community filled Overhills and inspired the annual staff golf tournament. Young Bert Alabaster, known as the "Overhills Ace" and tournament winner in 1928 and 1929, grew up practicing on the links with his dog, Spud, retrieving his balls.

With the stock market crash of 1929, many longtime investors took what remained of their fortunes elsewhere, leaving Rockefeller as the main shareholder. The purposefully low-profile hunting syndicate of socially elite became even smaller.

The Great Depression drew a line in the sand where financial ruin threatened virtually every part of life in the United States, and because of this, the paths that Overhills and Pinehurst No. 2 followed definitively influenced their futures. Both courses had financial struggles. Overhills was hit with the financial fallout of Averell Harriman selling his shares to Percy Rockefeller after Rockefeller's hunting dogs disrupted Harriman's bird hunts one too many times. The split released Overhills from being a syndicate and turned it into an exclusive family retreat.

Throughout the Great Depression, Ross was an active participant in ensuring that No. 2 would succeed. He is described by his great-grandson, Alex Shapiro, manager of Donald J. Ross LLC, as "an old world gentleman." Many times Ross would remind Lillian (Alex's grandmother) that "Success Nourishes Hope" — the motto of his family's crest. It was this hope for the future that provided Ross with a deep sense of ownership, pride and

responsibility to take care of his Pinehurst workers.

In a letter to Lillian on June, 1937, Ross wrote:

"I want to get the contract to build it so that I can find work for a few of my good men here who must be discharged unless I can find other employment. That, you see, is the responsibility that goes with being a father to so many workers. I feel that they depend on me for a livelihood."

Ross was just as active in making improvements to the Pinehurst courses, tinkering on No. 2 until 1935 and regularly working next to his employees. His desire for the success of Pinehurst, his workers and his vision is prevalent. Some of it is expressed in a letter he wrote to Lillian dated May, 1936:

"It's hard, dirty work, and I get very tired at the end of each day . . . working in the sandy soil raises dust all day so when I get home I look and feel like a coal miner . . . it all seems a thankless job. If it wasn't for that ambition which seems to drive me on to make this a great golf center, which no one follows, no one can improve, I wouldn't bother about doing the work."

Meanwhile, the Overhills course received a fraction of the attention, care and maintenance of No. 2. To make matters worse, the Rockefellers faced their own struggles when Percy, the patriarch of Overhills, passed away in 1938. Even though the family was better off than most people during years of economic hardship, they faced an immense inheritance tax on an estate valued at over \$9 million. The costly dilemma left





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Avery, Percy's son and the new squire of Overhills, puzzling over what could be done. He finally settled on selling a portion of Overhills land in order to pay for the exorbitant costs.

The struggles and choices made during those years were key factors to the future success and demise of Ross' two courses: Pinehurst No. 2 would grow to become a world famous golf course, while Overhills would fade into history like a forgotten Rembrandt.

With the onset of World War II, James W. Tufts (founder of Pinehurst) and Ross continued pouring all they could into making and strengthening No. 2 into the world-class course it is today, while the steward of Overhills focused on saving money and directly helped out the war effort. During the war, Overhills' back nine holes were abandoned and Fort Bragg conducted nightly training maneuvers across the courses' sandy terrain.

The relationship between Overhills and Fort Bragg would foreshadow Overhills' eventual fate over the next half century.

With the world at peace again, Donald Ross continued making courses until he passed away in Pinehurst in 1948. He left a legacy of completing more than 400 golf courses in the span of fifty years in the golf industry; the most cherished among his gifts are Pinehurst No. 2 and the sister courses he shared with his workers, family and friends.

In 1997, the cost of maintaining Overhills was too great for the Rockefellers. The once-vast personal retreat that spanned thousands of acres was sold to Fort Bragg, thus ending generations that spanned the Gilded Age to modern times, where practicality and nature trumped the early days where businessmen secured

their social standing on the hunt and sandy links.

In *Overhills Oral History*, Avery Lincoln Chappell Smith, great-granddaughter of Percy and Isabel Rockefeller, makes the last entry in the guest book in November, 1996.

"Goodbye beloved Overhills . . . and all of the most wonderful people in the world. I will always love you and never forget you. So many great memories here, so much fun. Never will there be another place like Overhills again. Goodbye."

With the passage of time, Ross' golf courses provided countless thousands of golfers and enthusiasts enjoyment, challenge and a walking meditation in nature. This month, a pair of historic U.S. Opens will pay homage to his dedication to No. 2. Meanwhile, the Overhills golf course, a masterfully designed course played on by the most privileged during the Progressive Era, sits under years of pine straw amid soft air and chirping robins.

Tommy MacPhail, who grew up and worked at Overhills, mentioned in *Overhills Oral History* that Isabel Rockefeller, a naturalist, once stopped him from planting dogwood trees in an organized manner, saying, "We need to put them out there as the Lord would have put them."

With Donald Ross' masterful strokes now lost and overgrown with years of foliage covering its genius, that is exactly how the land looks now, as God had intended. No longer a golf course, Overhills is letting nature take its course. **PS**

Gavin Powers is a frequent contributor to PineStraw magazine, who last wrote about hats at the races.



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