



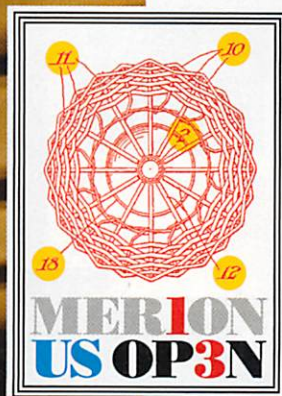
HUGH IRVINE WILSON (1879 - 1925)

In 1911 Merion Cricket Club sought to develop a new golf course of national distinction. The club selected a 32-year-old member named Hugh Irvine Wilson to design the new layout. Wilson was a graduate of Princeton University who earned a reputation in the Philadelphia region for his excellent golf.

Wilson traveled extensively in Scotland and England to study the great links courses. He used the lessons of his travels abroad to create a 126-acre piece of Main Line property. Wilson dotted his new course extensively with steep-faced, Scottish-style bunkers which came to be known as the "white faces of Merion." The resultant East Course influenced championship golf in the U.S. for more than a century.

Sadly, Wilson died at age 46 and was never able to fully pursue his new vocation of golf architecture. The East Course at Merion is Wilson's only documented complete design, and it remains his crowning achievement.





OH, TO BE A MEMBER AT MERION

IT HAS **TRADITION** AFTER
SIDESTEPPING THE TITANIC,
AND **SPIKE MARKS** THAT
GO BACK TO BOBBY JONES
WINNING THE GRAND SLAM.
AND IT HAS THE **BARN**,
THE **BUNGALOW**, THE MOB
AND MORE. ONE NOTE
OF CAUTION: DON'T GIVE
SHERM TOO MANY **STROKES**

by David Owen



THE DINING ROOM at Merion Golf Club is called the Trophy Room. One of its two long walls is dominated by a glass-fronted display case, which contains, among other memorabilia, replicas of the trophies of the United States Golf Association championships that the club has hosted—of which this year's Open will be the 18th, a record. The collection includes scaled-down versions of the trophies from the four tournaments that made up Bobby Jones' Grand Slam, which he completed at Merion in 1930 by defeating Eugene Homans on the 29th hole of that year's U.S. Amateur.

Even so, the most telling feature of the Trophy Room isn't the trophies; it's the floor. There are spike marks all over it, as there are on nearly every foot-accessible surface in the building—including the floor of the ballroom, which is downstairs and across the front hall. Members presumably never danced in their spikes, but they clearly did some tromping around. Until 1924, the 13th green was on the east side of the clubhouse, near where the driveway runs today, and golfers routinely cut through the building on their way to the 14th tee. As they did, they stopped at the bar for what was known as "the third drink"—the first two having been encounters

with Cobbs Creek, on the two previous holes. Nowadays, metal spikes are as rare as hickory shafts, but the old attitude remains. Merion is a golf club, and its members are golfers, and there is no part of the building in which golf shoes may not be worn.

Hats are a different matter. Merion might be the world's only golf club with a traditions committee, whose purpose is to intervene if members turn stubborn about things like taking mulligans, throwing clubs or wearing "covers under cover." (Golfers are asked to remain hatless even under the awning on the club's famous porch, which is virtually a continuation of the first tee and is the most sublime dining-and-drinking spot in golf.) The committee isn't the Stasi or the KGB, though. A new member told me that his cell-phone rang in the clubhouse while he was being considered for membership, and that the member who was interviewing him didn't turn him in to the authorities but merely reminded him to put the thing away. Indeed, the stated goal of the traditions committee is never to hold a meeting, and the simple fact of its existence is usually sufficient to keep everyone leaning in the right direction.

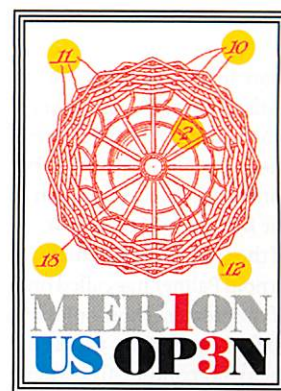
THE LEGEND OF HUGH WILSON

MERION'S East Course, on which this year's Open will be played, shares a surprising trait with three other perennial top-10 selections in Golf Digest's ranking of America's 100 Greatest: like Oakmont, Pebble Beach and Pine Valley, it was designed by a novice. It was laid out in 1911 by Hugh Wilson, a young member of what was then the

golf division of the Merion Cricket Club, who had been the captain of the golf team at Princeton but had no other grounding in golf design. The story that's usually told about Wilson—and I've told it myself, based on a history that the club published in 1989—is that before creating his masterpiece he spent seven months traveling through Scotland and England, taking notes on the world's most distinguished courses. But that story is wrong. John G. Capers III, a longtime member and the chairman of the club's archives committee, told me, "To the best of our knowledge, Wilson designed Merion before he went to the British Isles, and by the time he went the course had been routed, graded and seeded." Capers says that Wayne Morrison, who is a member of his committee and a semi-obsessive student of golf architecture, has searched ship-passenger

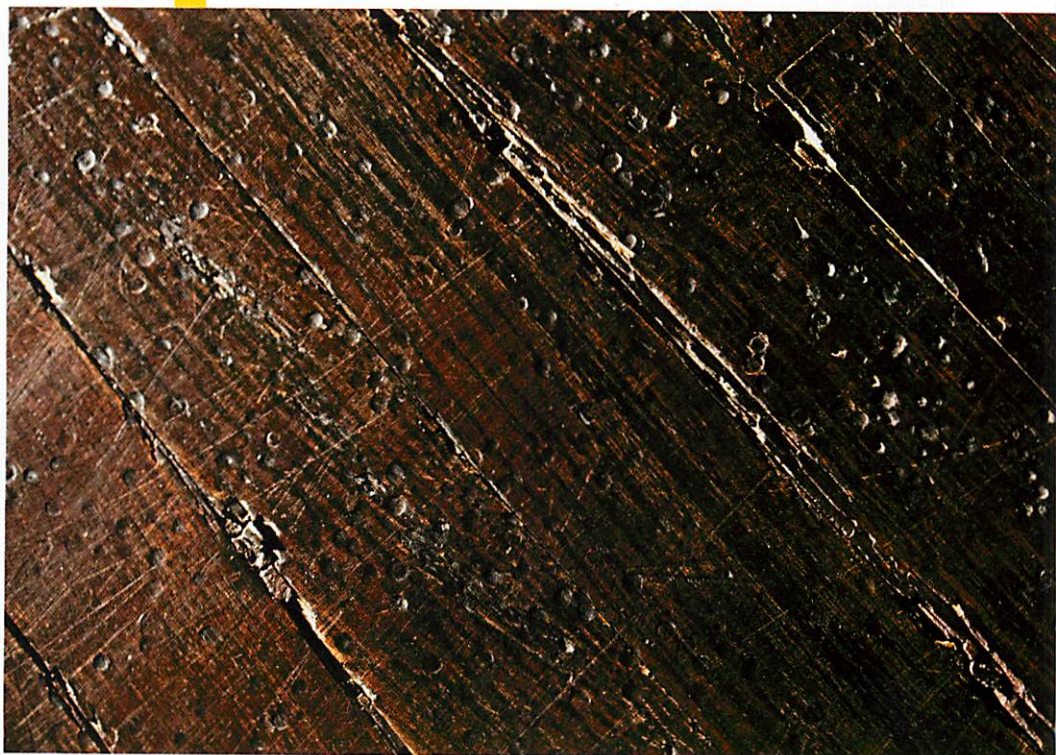
manifests from the relevant years and found no trace of Wilson. Furthermore, Capers says, the club's committee minutes from 1910 and 1911 show that Wilson, during the period when he was supposedly abroad, never missed a meeting or mentioned a trip. "He did go in the spring of 1912," Capers says, "and we are certain of that because Wayne found a two-inch clipping from a British newspaper saying that an American from Haverford was over there looking at courses." Wilson stayed for roughly two months. "He had a ticket to return on April 10, 1912—and a letter from his sister confirms this—but he wanted to see a few more courses, and so canceled his passage on the Titanic."

Wilson's close call was the club's good fortune, because



he did more work on the course when he returned. He and William Flynn, the club's first superintendent (and, later, the designer of Shinnecock Hills), added roughly 100 bunkers, creating the legendary "white faces of Merion." Merion's bunkers aren't prim ovals; the best of them are angry-looking rips in the fabric of the course, like the bunkers at Royal County Down, and they have become

LOTS OF HISTORY / THE TROPHY ROOM (LEFT) DISPLAYS MERION'S DISTINGUISHED CHAMPIONSHIP HISTORY: THE FLOORS (BELOW) SEND THE MESSAGE THAT THIS IS A GOLF CLUB.



more fearsome over the years, as the slashings of a century's worth of golfers have altered the adjacent topography. You can see the effect clearly on the front part of the green of the 115-yard 13th, which Arnold Palmer has called one of the greatest short holes in golf. The green was tilted but relatively contour-free when it was built, some 90 years ago; it now has a prominent leading edge, where sand from innumerable explosion shots has steadily accreted, forming a lip that complicates almost all escape attempts, especially if the player's tee ball has landed in one of the dozen

or so bushel-size clumps of dune grass scattered through the sand. Capers told me that you could probably date a golf course by studying the perimeters of its greenside bunkers—almost like carbon dating. “The highest built-up lips are always in front of the green and to the right, because most players are short or right,” he said. “The smallest are long and left.”

Capers presides over what he believes to be the largest private-club golf archive in the United States, if not the world. It's up a short flight of steps from the club's library, which is just off the hallway that leads to the women's locker room. Among its treasures: more than 10,000 digitized photographs and 90,000 digitized newspaper clippings and other documents; a set of Ben Hogan's (surprisingly heavy) stainless-steel irons, from the 1950s;

bound volumes containing all the handwritten work diaries of the club's superintendents from the 1920s onward; player badges from every important event played at the club since the 1930 U.S. Amateur; a U.S. Open license plate, which Capers acquired, by eminent domain, from the clubhouse parking lot in 1981; and two of the club's distinctive flagsticks, which are topped not by flags

but by balloon-shape wicker baskets (red for the opening nine and orange on the back). The club has used baskets on its flagsticks since 1915, when William Flynn patented them. They are one of Merion's fiercely protected traditions, although the USGA, for unknown reasons, replaced them with conventional flags for the 1950 Open—something it hasn't done since, and won't do in June.

THE OLDEST MEMBER

MERION's oldest member is SHERM Colwell, who was born in 1916, four years after the East Course was completed. “Sherm” is short for Sherman. “My full name is Louise Sherman Colwell,” she told me, “but there were so many Louises in my family that I was never called that.” She remembers following “that gentleman from the South” (whose name she needed a moment to recall) as he won the 1930 Amateur, when she was 14. “He was fun to watch,” she said. “He wasn't very big, but he was sparkly, and he wore plus fours and hit the ball a ton.” She majored in biology at Bryn Mawr, and worked in laboratories at Bryn Mawr Hospital and Pfizer, where she ran computer studies of the efficacy and side effects of drugs. She joined Merion around 1950, after finding it difficult to get weekend tee times at Philadelphia Country Club. Until six or seven years ago, she played on foot and, unless she had a caddie, carried her bag. “At 90, I decided to give that up and take a cart,” she said. She still plays more golf than you do. She goes out with the 18-hole women's group on Tuesdays and the nine-hole women's group on Thursdays,

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—SHERM COLWELL,
ON BOBBY JONES
AT THE 1930 AMATEUR
AT MERION



CHAMPIONS / THE WOMEN AT MERION ARE A FORCE IN INTER-CLUB COMPETITION.

and she plays most weekends with whoever's around, and she doesn't stop for winter. Between Merion rounds, she often plays at the retirement community where she lives, which is about a mile from the club and has a six-hole course. She also works out six days a week and volunteers at Bryn Mawr Hospital, which recently honored her for completing her 22,000th hour of service. I asked her what the years had done to her game. "They haven't made it better," she said.

Women golfers at Merion have an extraordinary competitive record. The walls in the hallway that leads from the porch to the Trophy Room are covered with wooden shields commemorating their victories in the Philadelphia Cup, an annual inter-club tournament sponsored by the Women's Golf Association of Philadelphia. The tournament has been played, with a couple of interruptions, since 1898, and Merion's women have won it 66 times, most recently in 2011 and 2012. Merion fields five full teams for the event, and, as of this year, is the last club in the association to be able to do so. (Sherm Colwell has played as high as the third team and as low as the fifth. Capers told me that she can be deadly in match play, in part because opponents half a century younger usually figure she'll be a walkover.) Merion's men have been less impressive. Their collection of inter-club shields—most of which are for non-championship flights—are less numerous, and are displayed less conspicuously, high on a wall at the dark end of the men's locker room, upstairs.

The first two USGA events hosted by Merion (on the club's original course, which was in Haverford) were the

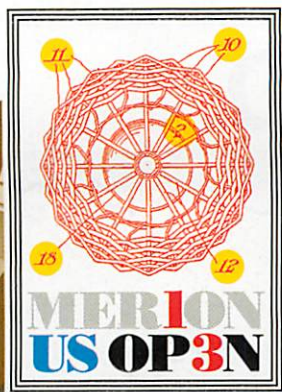
DINNER IS SERVED / THE LOCKER ROOM IS HOME TO THE POPULAR MONTHLY OFFSEASON PARTIES; JOHN CAPERS, CHAIRMAN OF THE ARCHIVES COMMITTEE, WITH SOME OF THE COLLECTION; AND AN OUTSIDE LOOK AT THE MERION CLUBHOUSE.

Women's Amateur championships of 1904 and 1909—and the runner-up in 1909 was Mrs. Ronald H. Barlow, a Merion member. Scott Nye, the club's current head professional, told me that the women of Merion have always been "ahead of their time," and that a significant contributor to their mid-century success was Fred Austin, who was the club's pro from 1946-'69. Austin came to the United States from England in 1924, and three years later was hired as an assistant by his countryman Ernest Jones, who was the head professional at Women's National Golf and Tennis Club, on Long Island. Women's National was founded in 1923 by Marion Hollins, who had won the Women's Amateur two years earlier. It was financed entirely by wealthy women, who allowed men to play as guests but not to join. Hollins discovered Jones on a trip to England in 1922. He had refined his ideas about the golf swing after losing a leg in World War I, and many of his pupils had distinguished careers, including Babe Zaharias and Glenna Collett Vare, who called him "the greatest golf teacher this world has ever produced." (Jones' book *Swinging Into Golf*, which he published in 1937 and dedicated to Hollins, is still highly readable.) Austin created an indoor instruction area in the part of Merion's clubhouse that's known as the



Barn (because it is, in fact, an old barn), and you can still see the hooks on one wall where his women students hung their coats when they arrived for winter lessons.

A more recent mainstay of women's golf at Merion was Pamela Fox Emory, who, when she was in her 20s, played in two U.S. Women's Amateurs and one British Women's Amateur. She became a Merion member in the 1970s and was the second woman to be named to the club's board of governors. I played the East Course with her in 1995, at around the time she was diagnosed with breast cancer, which killed her five years later, at the age of 51. Ann Higgins, a current member, who also has served on the club's board, told me, "It was because of Pam that I got involved in club events, and then in Philadelphia golf, and then in state golf, and then in the USGA. You had to be involved. She wouldn't let you relax, because she was just that type of person. She even got us on Pine Valley." The oral-history collection in the USGA's museum is now named for Emory. So is Merion's annual junior in-



vitational tournament, which she founded in the 1980s, and in which every team must include at least one girl.

UPSTAIRS VERSUS DOWNSTAIRS

IN A WINTER evening a decade ago, Edward Slevin Jr. organized a dinner for a small group of his golf buddies in the bar on the second floor of the Merion clubhouse. They were marking time till spring and, not incidentally, trying to spend down their food minimums. In the years since then, their informal gathering has evolved into a monthly off-season party, and it's now so popular that the only club space large enough to accommodate it is the men's locker room. I attended the March dinner, two weeks before the East Course was scheduled to reopen. Slevin sat at the head of a

very long table, which was almost a full lob wedge from end to end, and when dessert and various announcements were over much of the group reconvened downstairs, in the bar.

Merion's men's locker room will be found near the top of almost anyone's ranking of America's 100 Greatest. There are two levels, whose residents compete every year in an upstairs/downstairs tournament. (The current titleholder is indicated by a clock-like dial on the upper level, although I was told, confidentially, that members of the vanquished side will sometimes move the pointer.) Merion's legendary show-ers—which have heads the size of manhole covers and require not only oversize supply pipes but also oversize drain plates—are on both levels. In the 1940s, as the club struggled to overcome the

economic impact of the Great Depression and World War II, the house committee replaced the manhole covers with conventional fixtures, in the hope of reducing the club's water bill. J. Howard Pew, who was the president of the Sun Oil Company, requested that the old fixtures be put back and instructed the committee to add the club's water expense to his house account—as it

GRILLROOM TRIVIA ITEM:
NAME THE FIRST TWO 36-HOLE PRIVATE GOLF CLUBS IN THE UNITED STATES.

RIVALRY / EACH YEAR
IT'S THE **UPSTAIRS** VERSUS THE **DOWNSTAIRS**.

did for years. (Merion didn't retire its mortgage until 1971.) Hanging on a wall just outside the downstairs shower room are several framed scorecards. One of them commemorates a round in 1964 during which a member named Andrew J. Davis Jr. played the first seven holes in two over par (after hitting a ball out-of-bounds on the second) and then made 10 consecutive 3s. He finished with what must, by that point, have seemed like a disappointing 4, on the club's 450-yard closing hole, for a score of 65.

The club's most hallowed men's event is the member-member. Michael Zisman, who joined a decade ago, told me that he logged on to the club's website a little after 9 a.m. on the day that registration for this year's tournament began, and that, even though the system had been accepting reservations for just a few minutes, he and his partner were team No. 63. The club holds an annual tournament in honor of Bobby Jones, who not only won the 1930 Amateur at Merion but also played in his first national championship there (the 1916 Amateur, when he was 14) and won his first Amateur title (in 1924, when he was 22). Participants play alternate-shot in six-man groups, gather on the porch for cocktails, change into tuxedos, follow a bagpiper down the first fairway (in a procession referred to as the March of the Penguins) and cross Ardmore Avenue to the 11th hole, where they drink a champagne toast to Jones and the Grand Slam. The club's most coveted tournament invitation, several men told me, is for a mixed scramble that's conducted

each year by the women's nine-hole group. Each team consists of three women and one man, and being picked, a man said, is like being asked to the prom.

Also extremely popular is the men's member-guest, which attracts so many entrants that it's conducted as two separate but simultaneous events—a two-day and a three-day. Guest play is important at Merion, not because it generates revenue but because members are proud of their club and its place in golf history, and they like to show it off. Harry Hill, who is Merion's president, told me, "We want the guests who come here to have a wonderful experience, from the moment they arrive until the moment they leave. And generally they do—because of the staff, because of the members, because of the setting, because of the course. We want our guests to walk away and say, 'That was fun.'"

Robert Morey—who is the outgoing golf chairman and one of a relatively few members who have almost certainly played more rounds, lifetime, than Sherm Colwell, despite being 30 years younger—says, "That's our goal for the Open, too, and we've talked about it on our Open committee. We want every single player, whether he's the guy who wins or the guy who comes in last, to walk off the 18th green and say, 'Wow—being here was really cool.'"

EAST MEETS WEST

MERION outgrew its first course, on a rented farm, in the early 1900s, when the rubber-core ball made most of the country's golf holes seem too short. (Harry Hill's house stands on the site of the original 12th green.) In 1910, the club's leaders acquired an

L-shape 120-acre parcel in Ardmore, not far away. They kept the old course in play for one year after the new course, then called the Ardmore Course, had opened, thereby making Merion the first 36-hole private golf club in the United States. The new course proved so popular that the club, almost immediately, acquired an additional parcel, for which Wilson designed another 18, called the West Course—and when it opened, in 1914, Merion again became a 36-hole club. (Grillroom trivia item: Name the first two 36-hole private golf clubs in the United States.)

The West Course doesn't receive much attention from outsiders, in part because it's a mile from the East Course. Its clubhouse is a century-old log cabin called the Bungalow, and its flagsticks are topped by flags rather than baskets. But the West Course is, in many ways, the key to the greatness of the East Course and the club. Merion has successfully preserved a number of costly traditions that almost certainly would have come under intense member pressure years ago if the West Course hadn't been built, including the club's requirement that golfers on the East Course play with caddies, except during certain hours in the afternoon. (The East Course has just six golf carts, and even if you somehow wheedle your way into one you'll still need a caddy; the West Course has no caddies, and no restrictions on carts.) The availability of the West Course has also enabled Merion to maintain the East Course at a level of conditioning that would probably otherwise be viewed as incompatible with the club's equally powerful determina-

'WE WANT OUR GUESTS TO WALK AWAY AND SAY, THAT WAS FUN.'

—HARRY HILL



READY FOR LUNCH?
MARCOS ESCURRA IS KNOWN AS **THE HAMBURGER MAN.**

tion to accommodate players of all ages and skill levels. And the West Course has clearly been a factor in the women's century-long domination of competitive golf in Philadelphia—although the course is popular with men, too, and, in fact, gets at least as much play as the East.

Best of all, Merion keeps the West Course open all winter—a huge benefit. On a cold Sunday morning in March, I joined the regular weekend men's group, known as the Mob. We were welcomed by the manager, Marcos Escurra, who prepares what many Merion members believe to be the best hamburgers in Philadelphia. (The patties come from the main clubhouse but are grilled by Escurra in a manner that apparently cannot be duplicated.) We used the local version of winter rules, called Paradise. They allow

you a club-length, anywhere, in which to creatively improve your lie, thereby enabling you (for example) to employ a frozen worm cast as a fairway tee. The greens were slightly furry because they hadn't been mowed since 2012, but the holes are terrific and worthy of Wilson, and if the West were the only course you ever got to play you would consider yourself blessed. Sherm had told me that I might see her on the first tee, but she hadn't arrived by the time I teed off, with seven other men.

The West Course will give Merion's members home holes to play on during the three weeks in June when the rest of the club has been commandeered by the USGA—although some of the West will be needed for the Open, too. A large section of the first fairway will serve as the teeing ground of the tournament practice range, and the 11th and 12th fairways will be part of the range as well. The second, third and 18th holes will be used for player hospitality, parking and player practice areas. (The sprinkler heads on those holes had already been covered with plywood on the day I played, so that the USGA, eventually, could cover the turf with a protective fabric and a temporary layer of gravel.) A two-story tent will serve as the tournament locker room. There isn't room for the tent on the course, but a neighbor was thinking about lending his back yard, which abuts the first hole. He was also thinking about lending the club his (quite large) house as a lightning sanctuary for the players, should the weather turn nasty. The neighbor was being remarkably gracious—perhaps, I was told, because he would like to be a member himself. And what golfer wouldn't? ♣