



Oak Brook  
Historical  
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## A Swing Through Time: The History of Golf in Oak Brook, Illinois

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Nestled amidst the picturesque landscapes of Oak Brook, Illinois, lies a rich tapestry of golfing history that spans over a century. From the humble beginnings of the old York Golf Course to the prestigious Butler National and the modern-day Oak Brook Golf Course, the evolution of golf in this affluent suburb mirrors the growth and transformation of the community itself.

### Golf Origins in DuPage County

Golf is a tradition in the western suburbs and DuPage County. In fact, the oldest 18-hole course in North America, and one of the five founding clubs of the United States Golf Association (USGA) in 1892 is the Chicago Golf Club. Established by Charles Blair Macdonald. An accomplished golfer, Charles Blair Macdonald was at the forefront of the game. Charles was born in 1855 in Niagara Falls, Ontario, although he was raised in Chicago. At the age of 16, his wealthy Scottish father sent Charles to study at St. Andrew's University. He learned to play golf at the Old Course on St. Andrew's in Fife, Scotland and quickly fell in love with the sport. He was tutored by and played with the likes of Old Tom Morris, "The Grand Old Man of Golf" and won amateur championships. After designing a seven-hole golf course in conjunction with the 1892 Chicago World's Fair, Macdonald and his friend, Jarvis Hunt wanted their own golf course. Hunt was an architect, so he was able to make this dream a reality. Macdonald, who was, according to Golf Journal, "a true and imposing pioneer of golf in America" persuaded thirty of his Chicago Club colleagues to contribute ten dollars each to design and construct the first U.S. nine-hole golf course in Downers Grove, the original location of Chicago Golf Club. Some historians believe that it was also the location of the first U.S. 18-hole golf course, as Macdonald was said to have convinced Chicago Golf Club members to add nine more holes to the existing course. The existing course in Downers Grove is owned by the Downers Grove Park District and currently named Belmont Golf Club; it holds a significant place in U.S. history. The Chicago Golf Club moved to Wheaton in 1895.





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### **York Golf Club/Executive Golf Course**

The story of golf in Oak Brook traces back to soon after the early 20th century when the sport began to gain popularity across the United States. In 1926, the 18-hole York Golf Club, designed by Earl Porter, was established at 22<sup>nd</sup> Street and York Road, making it one of the oldest golf clubs in the region. Porter remained the head pro at the Club until his death in 1956. Located near the present-day Oak Brook Polo Club, the York Golf Club was a great layout that offered enthusiasts a serene retreat amidst the rolling hills and lush greenery of the countryside. The course was famous for its water holes, particularly the fourth hole, which had a double water hazard and the fifteenth which had a triple water hazard. Vince DiTella, the longtime pro golfer joined the staff in 1947 and remained as emeritus pro until just before his death in 1991.

In 1973, York Golf Club became the Executive Golf Course. It reverted to a nine-hole private course, after donating much of its track to the neighboring Butler National Golf Club. The Executive Golf Course had a membership roster of certainly Paul Butler and many of his friends, but it was a veritable Who's Who of early Oak Brook residents, mostly from Ginger Creek and York Woods. Yet, it was a limited list; and in order to expand membership, the course became semi-private in 1975.

### **Oak Brook Golf Club**

By 1978, the Executive Golf Course was closed for expansion. The golf course changed its name to the Oak Brook Golf Club in 1980. As a public golf course, it offered residents and visitors alike an accessible and enjoyable golfing experience. The expansion was enabled by borrowing



from the southern polo and airfields along 31<sup>st</sup> Street. The expanded course was designed by Larry Packard and built by the Wadsworth Construction Company for \$700,000. It officially opened on July 7, 1980, and the clubhouse was completed later that year. This 18-hole championship course still boasts scenic views and strategic challenges that appeal to golfers of all skill levels. In 1991, there was a call to expand the Club another nine holes to make it a 27-hole course. This would have resulted in the carving out of forests along Salt Creek and converting the south practice polo field. This plan was ultimately shelved due to cost and for

fear of losing many of the Oaks in Oak Brook. Perhaps more than anything, it was important for the village to protect the open space of the Sports Core long into the future.



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Over the years, the Oak Brook Golf Course has undergone several renovations and improvements, enhancing its facilities and amenities to meet the evolving needs of the community. In fact, the Oak Brook Golf Club clubhouse was renovated and expanded in 1998. Today, it stands as a testament to Oak Brook's commitment to preserving its golfing heritage while embracing modernity and innovation. The Oak Brook Golf Club remains a popular destination for golfers 40 years after opening. The Golf Club is part of the village-owned Oak Brook Sports Core, which is a 269-acre, open-space facility that also features the Bath & Tennis Club and polo & athletic fields.

### **Butler National Golf Club**

As Oak Brook evolved into a premier residential and commercial destination in the 1970s and 80s, so did its golfing landscape. Butler National Golf Club was the vision of businessman, philanthropist and sportsman Paul Butler, who was also the founder of the village of Oak Brook. Butler used his financial strength to buy over 3,600 acres of polo fields in Oak Brook so he could partake in his love of polo. Obviously, he had an affinity for golf, since he had everything to do with the establishment of golf in Oak Brook at the original York and Executive Golf Clubs.



Butler had a vision to create a world-class golf course that would be challenging enough to test the skills of the best players in the world. To bring his vision to life, Butler enlisted the services of the renowned golf course architect George Fazio with some assistance from his nephew, Tom



Fazio who later refined the course. The Fazio's were known for their ability to design courses that are both visually stunning and challenging to play. Construction of the course began in 1972 and was completed in 1974, just in time for its first professional golf tournament. Butler National quickly garnered acclaim for its challenging layout and immaculate conditioning. Throughout the years, Butler National has played host to prestigious golfing events. The Western Open, one of the oldest professional golf tournaments in the United States, found its home at Butler National for 17 years. These events brought together some of the world's finest golfers including

legends like Jack Nicklaus, Tom Watson, and Hale Irwin, while highlighting the challenging nature of the Butler National course to a global audience. The club's commitment to excellence and tradition has earned it a place among the most exclusive and revered golfing destinations in the country. On a personal note, in 1975, I can remember playing at the old Executive Golf Club





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course and ducking for cover in a thunderstorm at the old A-frame clubhouse just before Lee Trevino was struck by lightning at the 13th hole of the nearby Western Open Golf Tournament at Butler National. It is still a vivid memory.

The prestige of Butler National is unquestionable, carved in its celebrated past and visible in its present-day operations. The Club has historically been an all-male institution, though this policy has sparked debate and controversy over the years. Despite the DEI controversies, the club's commitment to providing an exceptional golfing experience remains unshaken. It will be interesting to see how Butler National navigates the evolving landscape of golf, societal norms, and member expectations in the future. Change may be difficult. Nevertheless, a round of golf at Butler National Golf Club is a bucket-list experience for any hard-core golfer.

### **Butterfield Country Club**

Butterfield Country Club has a rich history that dates to its founding in 1920. The club was established by a group of prominent businessmen and golf enthusiasts who resided west of Chicago. Originally known as the Butterfield Golf Club, it started as a nine-hole golf course designed by one of the most prolific of course designers, noted golf course architect Tom Bendelow, born in Aberdeen Scotland and known as the *Johnny Appleseed of American Golf*. Over the years, Butterfield Golf Club gained popularity and expanded its facilities. In 1921, the course was expanded to 18 holes, and in 1922, a clubhouse was built to accommodate the growing membership. At the time, there were only a few private clubs, and not enough to accommodate the vast and growing number of players who had a burning desire to play the game of golf. It seemed too, especially around the Chicago metropolitan area, that most of the clubs were located either in the North or South regions. The West side was most certainly ready for a fine golf club.

In 1920, the Chicago Daily News reported that a new country club was being formed “far out” in the city’s western suburbs. That bare announcement noted that 130 golfers already had shelled out \$500 each for the privilege of charter membership. Father (later Monsignor) John J. Code, founder of St. Edmund’s (Catholic) Church on Oak Park Avenue, and his two golf-loving brothers were charter members. Some of the original group, including Code and his brothers, were members at the now-long-closed



Westward Ho (golf club) in Austin on Chicago’s West Side, which was going to lose its lease. None belonged to Oak Park Country Club, which back then had adopted an informal Protestant-



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only policy soon after its founding. To this day, Butterfield is reputed to have a strong Catholic membership. The club's golf course has gained a reputation for its challenging layout and beautiful scenery. Today, Butterfield Country Club, although technically unincorporated since the 1940s, remains a premier private club in the Oak Brook area. It continues to provide its members with exceptional golfing experiences, a wide range of recreational activities, and a welcoming community. The club's commitment to maintaining high standards and its rich history contribute to its status as a respected institution in the world of golf and country clubs.

### **Midwest Golf Club**

Very little remains of the Midwest Golf Club in southwestern Oak Brook. The original 36 holes were converted into private custom-built homes in a park-like, secure, gated environment. The Midwest Club was created from an unusually beautiful and mature golf course. Its 231 acres are bordered generally by Butterfield Country Club (31st Street) on the north, Midwest Road on the east, 35th Street on the South and Meyers Road on the west.

### **Willow Crest Golf Club**

Even though Willow Crest Golf Club at Oak Brook Hills Hilton boasts an Oak Brook address, it is technically located in neighboring Westmont. The hotel meeting and golf complex does have Oak Brook roots, however. Michael Butler (Paul's son and famous producer of *Hair*) and his sister, Jorie, had a hand in the development of the resort and conference center in the 1980s. They wanted a prestigious center for business and retreat. It was privately owned and then managed by Marriott for a while. It is now operating as the Hilton Chicago/Oak Brook Hills Resort & Conference Center.

The Willow Crest Golf Club is featured as a prime component of the property. It boasts a beautiful, natural setting, gently rolling bent grass fairways, well-bunkered greens, and unique water challenges on the 18-hole championship course. The course was designed by a regional golf course developer and architect, Dick Nugent and opened in 1987.

Each of these golf courses is a testament to the enduring appeal and grandeur of the sport of golf. As Oak Brook continues to thrive and grow, so will its legacy in the world of golf. With a rich history that spans generations, the golf courses of Oak Brook serve as more than just places to play; they are symbols of tradition, community, and the enduring love affair between players and the game.

**Sources:** Primarily from Oak Brook Historical Society files contributed by Chief Archivist and Board Member, Raymond Paice. Information also derived from *Country Club Magazine* and various local Club web sites.

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### **About the Author:**

Barry Cesafsky is a Board Member of the Oak Brook Historical Society. He first moved to Oak Brook in 1964 and has resided in the community for most of his life. He has also played golf on each of the Oak Brook and nearby courses mentioned in the article.