

## **Links to the Past**

*A made-in-Oregon renovation for Gearhart Golf Links*

by Gary Corbin

Since the explorations of Lewis and Clark, Oregon has always been known as a place for pioneers. But even pioneers need to relax once in a while — and what better way than by shooting a few rounds of golf by the sea?

Gearhart Golf Links, on the north coast of Oregon, is the oldest golf course in the Pacific Northwest and a sentimental favorite for many Oregon families. It's where fathers first handed golf clubs to sons or daughters to teach them how to play. When Gearhart began to show signs of aging and neglect, more than a century of golf memories and a future of opportunities were in danger of being lost.

It took the force of several of Oregon's icons coming together, including Columbia Sportswear CEO Tim Boyle, Bill McCormick of McCormick and Schmick's, and Mike and Brian McMenamin of McMenamins to keep the memory and reality of Gearhart Golf Links from washing away like yesterday's tide. But when all of these made-in-Oregon successes teamed in Gearhart, it was a foursome to be reckoned with.

## **Looking back at the Links**

It was in 1891 that Scottish financier Robert Livingstone first laid out four holes that would eventually become Gearhart Golf Links, often touted as being the second-oldest golf course west of the Mississippi. Links-style golf, popular in Scottish coastal areas, represents a quaint throwback to the days before specialized titanium drivers became affordable to the weekend duffer. Just more than 6,200 yards long, the course has essentially the same layout as it did in 1935.

"It's short, but it plays long because of the wind," says Gearhart Golf Links head pro Jason Kunde. Though not visible over the dunes and homes blocking the view, the course is just 400 yards from the Pacific Ocean. "You can't see it, but you can hear and feel it," Kunde adds.

As the only public 18-hole course in the area, Gearhart attracts mostly locals but also lures competitive amateurs from Portland and even Seattle. Being the only course in the region when it was first built, Gearhart attracted high-society Portlanders by the trainloads in the 1920s looking for some entertainment on long weekends away at the ocean.

Despite its diminutive size, the course's rating (71.6 on a par 72) and slope (137) betray its unexpected difficulty for many scratch golfers. "It's a good challenge for all handicaps," Kunde says. "Some people come here and play their life's best round. Others leave shaking their heads in frustration."

Kunde says the course appeals to older golfers and women golfers who aren't as strong as their younger male counterparts. "You can play the course in the typical American style, where you hit it high and stick it when it lands, or links style — more of a bounce and roll."

Public courses sometimes earn a reputation for being less well maintained than the country clubs. Not so at Gearhart. “Our greens are almost always perfect,” Kunde insists. “We keep the course in good shape year-round.”

### **Disrepair and restoration**

But that hasn't always been the case. Gearhart Golf Links fell into a state of disrepair after having changed ownership several times — as often as five times in a single eight-year period — and fires razed first the nearby Gearhart Hotel in the early 70s and then the Sand Trap clubhouse in 1998. The clubhouse was quickly rebuilt and enlarged, but the course soon encountered financial strains.

This caused no small amount of local concern. Gearhart, Ore., the “Martha’s Vineyard of the West,” is a quiet community, home to about 1,200 residents living in beach houses and vacation homes 10 miles north of Seaside. Locals wanted Gearhart preserved, not only to maintain the tourist economy and keep golf alive in the vicinity, but to preserve its history. Gearhart was once Oregon’s premium tournament site, hosting the Oregon Open and various championships. Chandler Egan, as resident pro, redesigned the course when it was overhauled between 1926 and 1935, and the *Oregonian* cited the tourneys there as being the most exciting events north of Monterey.

A group of about a dozen Gearhart property owners, led by Boyle and McCormick, purchased the property and began to restore it several years ago. “Previous owners had modified the course to make it more difficult — too difficult, in fact,” says Boyle.

Boyle should know — an avid 12-handicap golfer, he played the course many times before buying it. “I first broke 90 at Gearhart,” he says proudly, although he’d just as soon skip the windy 18<sup>th</sup> hole. As a Gearhart homeowner and vacationer, he knew the course’s historical value as well as its importance to the tiny resort community.

The problem, Boyle says, is that the course was “tricked up” too much, introducing features that made the course harder to play and led it further from Chandler Egan’s classic design. That was corrected quickly. The new owners moved a few greens, removed some bunkers, and moved the trouble off the tees, Kunde says. The course is now even closer to the Egan-designed links of the 1920s and ’30s than before. “We put a premium back on accurate golf,” he says.

### **Deep in the Sand Trap**

Key to the renovation was the clubhouse. The new building was a beautiful throwback to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture that existed in Gearhart’s heyday, but there were problems. The previous owners were overly ambitious with the expansion, Boyle says, and the new Sand Trap restaurant was a financial drain.

The new partners found a solution: Brian and Mike McMenammin. The McMenammin brothers, both avid golfers, knew Gearhart Golf Links and liked it — both the course and the Sand Trap. “I’ve played since I was a kid,” Brian says. “And I’ve quit a number of times.”

Experienced at running beachfront pubs after their success with Lincoln City’s Lighthouse Brewpub and with a golf course already under their wing at Edgefield, they knew what they were getting into.

What’s more, the brothers already had a connection to Gearhart, according to McMenammin’s historian Tim Hills. Their Ram’s Head pub on Northwest 23<sup>rd</sup> Avenue in Portland is on the original site of Robert Livingstone’s Portland mansion.

The tight sense of community around Gearhart was a real draw — and a practical help, too. “The Sand Trap has been a gathering place for a long time,” says Brian. “Lots of people came forward with pictures and stories of Gearhart.”

Many of those were added to the collection they inherited when they took over in January 2008.

The exterior, a large red brick Cape Cod-style structure with lots of windows and a high-pitched roof, was beautiful already, but not so the interior. “There were parts of it that were inappropriate,” Boyle says, giving it a “cold” feel. Not least were the video poker machines, now gone from the property.

The McMenammins turned the Sand Trap around, and fast. The restaurant reopened March 4, just two months after the renovation began. “It was already pretty nice,” says Brian. “There was a really good kitchen that we kept. There are meeting rooms downstairs, a big deck, and an outdoor flat area that can be tented.”

While the renovations were mostly cosmetic, they were dramatic. Veneered paneling was stripped from the walls and replaced with reclaimed lumber. Old-style globe lights hang from wooden box beams and shine through decorative stained-glass dividers. Flooring, fixtures and metal furniture were scrapped in favor of natural and restored materials. “There’s lots of wood,” Brian says. “We made it feel warm. We thought it felt cold before. We added some historical pictures in addition to the ones that were already there.”

“We’re very excited about the prospects for the business now that the McMenammins are running the Sand Trap,” Boyle says. That sentiment is no doubt justified, considering the McMenammins’ track record of running successful pubs in buildings they’ve restored. In addition, Gearhart has few other restaurants from which locals can choose. As a result, this early in the golf season the bulk of the guests thus far have been local residents, Brian says.

Building from their Lighthouse experience, the McMenammins tweaked their traditional menu to spruce things up at the Sand Trap. Rather than the usual pub grub of burgers and fries, there’s some higher end stuff, he says. “There’s lots of seafood from local markets, plus steaks and pizza.”

And no McMenamins pub — or golf clubhouse — would be complete without beer. While the Sand Trap is not a brewery, its downstate cousin, the Lighthouse Brewpub, is one of the main suppliers of beer for Gearhart, along with Edgefield and other breweries in the Empire. As such, the Sand Trap is able to serve up popular styles such as Terminator, Hammerhead and Ruby Raspberry Wheat — and, of course, Budweiser.

“We don’t have a special beer for the Sand Trap yet,” Brian says. “We always like to do that in each of our pubs, so I’m sure we will. We just haven’t developed it yet.”

### **Future of the Links**

While golf is certainly no stranger to beer, the marriage of links-style golf and the McMenamins brewing and tavern chain represents a unique combination and opportunity for success. The draw, explains Kunde, is threefold. First is the historical aspect, giving golfers an opportunity to play on the birthplace of golf in the Pacific Northwest. Second is the new Sand Trap, which can now entertain vacationers of all kinds. Third, “You’re playing golf by the sea,” he says, “just an hour and a half from Portland.”

Now restored to its original glory with a revived and unique 19<sup>th</sup> hole awaiting, Gearhart Golf Links offers the opportunity to create memories for a new generation of wind-blown golfers. Thanks to a few new Oregon pioneers, future generations will be able to enjoy the same leisurely days of golf by the sea as the golf pioneers who first laid out four holes in the coastal sand dunes.

“A lot of people have fond memories of playing here,” says Kunde. “People have told me it was the first course they’ve played on.”

With luck, perseverance and hard work, Kunde will keep hearing that for many years to come.