Fairways in the Sky

BY JAY STULLER

Photos courtesy of Garry Moore and Lane Lewis

A Temporal and Economic Interpretation of Sierra Golf

Packing a bag of hickory–shafted clubs, the young man with the silky voice was a regular at the Brockway Golf Course on the north shore of Lake Tahoe, honing his game on summer afternoons before reporting for the night shift at the Cal–Neva Resort. In 1934, he invited friends, co–workers and several pro golfers to Brockway for an informal tournament and party. His so–called "clambake" proved so popular that Bing Crosby, the nation's leading singer and a budding film star, convened it there the following year as well.

Crosby's iconic tournament quickly outgrew Brockway and eventually landed in Pebble Beach, where it's now known as the AT&T. But the nine–hole course by the lake endures. Other notables have played it, including Bob Hope, Frank Sinatra, Dwight Eisenhower and Tiger Woods, as well as generations of tourists and locals. In fact, what is today called Old Brockway is in some ways an origin story for the formation and growth of high–country golf.

While the Sierra's terrain has been catnip to golf's top architects, it is even more so to developers who envision courses as enhancing or anchoring something larger. In 1924, Harry Comstock figured golf would be a dandy amenity for his Brockway Hotel. During America's Golden Age of Golf Course Architecture, he hired Scottish architect John Duncan Dunn to design the course, which opened two years later.

"This was before bulldozers were used to shape courses, so his routing followed natural contours," explains Old Brockway owner Lane Lewis. Dunn's narrow fairways wander through towering Jeffery pines framing lake views, ending at small, turtleback greens common at much older Scottish layouts.

"When my father bought the course in 1978, everyone called it Rockway," says Lewis, who took over in 1980 and refurbished the course, added a driving range, renovated clubhouse and a restaurant. His son Tim, the director of marketing, represents the third generation of Lewis stewardship. And after all these years, Old Brockway has a steady and diverse clientele, albeit with fewer Crosby–level celebrities.

"We get everything from laborers in cutoffs to multi–millionaires," adds Lewis. "And playing the course is like taking a step back in time."

Edgewood, Tournaments & Television

If Old Brockway is from the past, Edgewood Tahoe arguably arrived ahead of its time, as the Sierra's first tournament–ready course. Built by Brooks Park of the Nevada gaming and cattle clan, and designed by George Fazio, it opened in 1968. Set against Lake Tahoe's south shore and its jaw–dropping scenery, Edgewood was for years ranked as one of *Golf Digest*'s top 100 courses in America. It is also among the best–known, thanks largely to television.

In 1980 it hosted the low–key and untelevised 1980 US Public Links Championship, proving Tahoe could handle a tournament. Next came the 1985 US Senior Open. "And that was a very big deal," recalls Phil Weidinger, a South Lake Tahoe public relations wizard who served as the tournament's director. "The Champion's Tour was just coming into its own with Arnold Palmer, Billy Caspar and Miller Barber. This was the first Senior Open ever televised. I don't think Brooks Park cared a thing about the tour, but I remember him saying, 'We've got to get the course on TV. When people see Tahoe, they'll flock here.'" And with restaurants, casinos and major nightlife only a wedge shot up the hill from the course, the tournament turned into a huge party.

That's one reason the American Century Celebrity Golf Championship will return to Edgewood in July 2015 for its 26th year. Broadcast on NBC, it's the only celebrity tournament still televised, thanks to the

Edgewood 18, Sunrise photo by Ron Hanna

(left to right) Stephen Curry, Charles Barkley, Larry the Cable Guy Photos Courtesy American Century Championship

(left) Carson Valley Golf Course, foot golf (right) Tom Brooks' youngest child, Aoife

setting and participants such as Don Cheadle, Donald Trump, Michael Jordan, Stephen Curry and Charles Barkley, who has been known to sing karaoke after golf. Typical attendance is around 40,000. Said Carol Chaplin, executive director of the Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority, after last year's event: "The buzz was there, the town was full and lodging occupancy high."

(The same is true of the former Reno-Tahoe Open, a PGA Tour event now known as the Barracuda Championship, which in July will hold its 17th annual tournament at the Montrêux Golf and Country Club near Reno.)

A Divine Family Affair

There's a more modest brand of golf on the east side of the Sierra in Nevada's Carson Valley, where a group of public courses market themselves as The Divine Nine. With the least expensive green fees in the region they're something of a civic asset, serving mostly locals, offering specials to seniors and promoting youth programs. One is the family–owned Carson Valley Golf Course in Minden.

Set along the Carson River, the rather flat course gets much of its charm from an abundance of deciduous trees, a parkland quality rare in the high desert. "The course was built in 1965 with the idea that it would be a private club that drew its members from the nearby housing going up," explains Tom Brooks, who runs the course with his wife, Manya. "But once the developer made his money on homebuilding and left, there weren't enough people to support a club."

Carson Valley struggled and when Brooks' father, Don, purchased it in 1983, "Nine of the holes were closed because of a flood," says Tom. "The place was a wreck. My dad and his superintendent got it up and running in six weeks."

A golf course is a living and breathing thing that demands continuous care, adds Brooks. "One year we'll add a bunker, the next widen a fairway." It's also a true family business at Carson Valley, with 16–year–old Colin, 14–year–old Grace and 11–year–old Aoife pitching in. "They pick range balls, take inventory, and park carts," says Tom, "whatever's needed."

The Boom Years

In 1996, two golf courses opened in Calaveras County, separated by about a dozen miles, each intended to anchor a housing development. Saddle Creek and Greenhorn Creek were quite possibly the most remote high quality tracks in California. In a county with only 48,000 residents, the formula almost guaranteed a rough start for both.

Greenhorn Creek photos by Robert Kaufman

Saddle Creek is near unincorporated Copperopolis. Designed by Carter Moorish and Tad Buchanan, the course winds through oak-studded hills and features 21 mostly natural ponds that once slaked the thirst of ranging cattle. The year after Saddle Creek opened, *Golf Digest* named it the 7th best new upscale course in the United States. But while golfers came to play, few stayed.

Los Angeles–based Castle & Cooke purchased the troubled property in 1999, and replaced the temporary clubhouse with a handsome lodge, while adding more than a dozen bungalows that now house corporate outings and traveling golf groups. Homebuilding finally caught fire; tucked into the ample acreage between fairways are homes with distinctive architectural styles including Arts & Crafts, California Villa and Craftsman Foothills. With more permanent residents near the course, Castle & Cooke built an old–fashioned town center and square in Copperopolis, bringing life to a town that hadn't seen much life since the 1850s.

Up Highway 4 near Angel's Camp is Greenhorn Creek, where a fifth generation descendant of a Gold Rush family, Barden Stevenot, decided to build a residential community around a golf course. Architect Don Boos designed a pleasing route through rolling hills, while preserving archaeological artifacts, including remnants of a stone wall built by Chinese laborers in the 1800s, which splits the middle of the fourth fairway.

A year after Greenhorn Creek opened, Stockton developer Fritz Grupe purchased the property and in 2000 hired Robert Trent Jones Jr. to rebuild about half the holes and dress up the bunkering and greens. More than 30 cottages make up housing in the community. "We're in a nice spot," says Buck Reed, Greenhorn's marketing director. "We're above the central valley fog and below the snow, so we have great year–round weather. And we get a lot of guests who come up to play both courses."

Good Times, Bad Times

While few golfers would place Truckee in the

Martis Camp Hole10, Green Panorama photo courtesy Paul Hamill

same sentence as Bandon Dunes or Pebble Beach, a downright remarkable number of first–rate golf courses, public and private, have opened here over the past 20 years. One of the first sits on a 900–acre property in the Martis Valley, where the private gated community of Lahontan is built around the eponymous course designed by Tom Weiskopf. Shortly after opening in 1998 it was rated by *Travel & Leisure* magazine as one of America's Top 100 golf communities.

Also near Truckee is a trio of outstanding public courses, including the Brad Bell–designed Coyote Moon, where massive boulders frame greens and the tee shot on the par 3, 13th hole drops 227 feet; a Jack Nicklaus "Signature" design, Old Greenwood, which opened in 2004 as one of *Golf Magazine*'s 10 best new public access courses in the United States; and, Greenwood's companion club, Gray's Crossing, designed by Peter Jacobsen and Jim Hardy and opened in 2007.

There are two other gated communities in the golf–rich Martis Valley. One is Schaffer's Mill. Designed by golfer Johnny Miller and architect John Harbottle and originally called Timilick, the course was meant to be private and anchor a 475–acre property with some 400 homes. Alas, it opened in 2008, just as the Great Recession threw stiff headwinds at such projects. Now rebranded as Schaffer's Mill, the course is open to public play and a healthy number of homes are under construction.

Considered by many to be the most successful real estate development in the nation, Martis Camp breezed through the recession and is credited with saving the Truckee construction industry. Its course was designed by Tom Fazio, the son of Edgewood's architect, and may be the best in the region. When it opened in 2009, *Golf Digest* ranked Martis Camp as the third best new private course in the country; *GolfWeek* recently called it "one of America's top 50 modern golf courses."

Although an exceptionally exclusive place, Martis Camp opened its gates to the public, at no charge, when it hosted the 2013 US Junior Amateur national championship. "We had some nice galleries with a real mix of people, including members and folks from surrounding communities," says Gus Jones, Martis Camp's head golf professional. "Because we're a family–oriented place, the Junior Amateur was the perfect event." Televised on the Golf Channel, it brought the region to yet another audience.

So does that mean more courses? Jones has doubts. "At this point I think the demand for more facilities is very limited. There will have to be a real change before you see another new golf course in the Sierra." SH