

Lilli-putt-ian Landmarks

History and Significance of Miniature Golf Courses

The miniature golf course, as we know it today, is a purely American creation. Combining sport, architecture, fad, and fantasy, mini-golf has a colorful history which stretches back almost a century.

Early History

The traditional game of golf experienced a wild surge of popularity in the years immediately following World War I. Small “practice” putting courses are reported to have been constructed by aficionados of the sport in both Europe and the United States during this period. One of the most elaborate, and best documented, was built on an estate in Pinehurst, North Carolina in 1916.

There, James Barber retained an amateur architect named Edward H. Wiswell to design “Thistle Dhu,” an 18-hole course intended to duplicate the challenges of the “big game” on a diminutive scale.¹ This private course, placed in a garden setting complete with walkways, flowerbeds, a fountain, benches, and a summer house, was a forerunner of things to come.

Six years later, another golf fanatic, Thomas McCulloch Fairbairn, attempted to build a small

private course on his cotton plantation in Mexico, but was frustrated by the parched climate and his inability to establish suitable greens. After much trial and error, he developed a formula for a putting surface using cottonseed hulls, sand, oil, and green dye—a discovery he later patented. With the invention of artificial turf came the first opportunity to create a durable putting green for anyone, anywhere. Before long, two New Yorkers, Drake Delanoy and John N. Ledbetter, used the new turf to turn miniature golf into a popular commercial enterprise—establishing over 150 putting courses on the rooftops of Manhattan’s skyline.

The “Madness of 1930”

The biggest names in the history of little golf are Garnet and Frieda Carter, owners of the Fairyland Inn high atop Lookout Mountain on the border of Tennessee and Georgia. In 1926, Frieda Carter, the creative spirit behind the design of the prestigious resort, created a “Tom Thumb” golf course on the front lawn of the inn.² It is at this point in the development of the game that the design of greens takes a profoundly whimsical turn. Frieda’s “midget” links featured cleverly constructed hazards and fairytale sculptures (elves, gnomes, and Little Red Riding Hood, among them). This course was more than just a pint-sized imitation of the traditional sport, it was a unique and diverting “amusement” which had enormous appeal to adults and children alike.³

The overwhelming success of the Tom Thumb course inspired Garnet Carter to patent its design in 1929 and obtain the rights to use Fairbairn’s cottonseed hull turf. Despite the market crash, Tom Thumb Golf courses were soon being manufactured and distributed nationally in partnership with several factories. A craze for mini-golf gripped the country. Carter sold the courses, which included a customized plan with prefabricated parts, for \$4,500. By mid-1930,

A middle-era course featuring “whimsies,” but no moving parts. Whales are a common motif of the 1950s. For example, the Lomma brothers created an animated whale obstacle with a shot-sensitive blowhole.



Tom Thumb Golf had hundreds of competitors and it is estimated that between 25,000 and 50,000 courses had been built across the United States. Most of these courses were located in urban areas on rooftops, in basements and ball-rooms, or on vacant lots. On an average day, four million Americans played the game.⁴ Miniature golf attracted stars like Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, stimulated the publication of “how to” books and trade magazines, and inspired fashion and songs.

The courses of 1930 had many of the landscape and architectural features that we associate with today’s versions. A plan typically included 18 holes, each easily distinguished from the next by use of Rube Goldberg-style hazards, miniature architectural structures, and amusing figures. Theme courses were popular and the use of elaborate decoration and live musical accompaniment was common. Some courses even featured trained animals. Along with football and baseball, miniature golf was one of the early outdoor sports to use night lighting. It was not unusual to see evening players wearing furs and formal attire. Some indoor courses featured air-conditioning. Important innovations of the period included the scoring table and the “bottomless” 18th hole. But even with all the fancy trappings, at 25 to 50 cents a game, the diversion remained—like the movies—a truly democratic activity. However, like so many other fads of the era, the fever for miniature golf quickly burned out. By late 1931, the frenzy was over. Courses across the nation were abandoned and later destroyed.

Golf Hits the Road

It took 20 years for the sport to be rediscovered. The baby boom of the 1950s and the sprawl of suburbia fueled a quiet resurgence. Unlike the red-hot fad of the 1930s, mini-golf was marketed as a wholesome family pastime. It is during this period that miniature golf begins to be paired with food concessions (most often soft-serve ice cream), motels, drive-in movie theaters, driving ranges, and other commercial concerns along the American roadside. Courses also sprouted up on beachfronts, near campgrounds, and other tourist areas.⁵

Al and Ralph Lomma are often credited as the fathers of modern-day miniature golf. The brothers were instrumental in the renaissance of inspired, stunt courses which featured moving hazards and required accuracy and concentration. Their first course was built in Scranton,

Pennsylvania in 1956. Soon, they had established a business manufacturing and selling prefabricated courses. To solve the problem of turf, the Lommas had a company in South Carolina produce a special indoor/outdoor carpet, one of the first of its kind, expressly for use on their greens. Even today, one of the selling features of Lomma golf is that a course can be installed in one day and moved indoors seasonally if desired.⁶

Large franchises, like Don Clayton’s Putt-Putt Golf and Games[®], also grew popular in the 1950s.⁷ However, many of the roadside courses of the period were homemade, folk art creations. Using poured concrete, chicken wire, and lumber, these mom and pop courses proliferated like theme parks, souvenir shops, and other tourist attractions spurred by the automobile culture.

The pattern of development established in the 1950s endured into the 1960s. Miniature golf courses grew with the baby boom, becoming bigger and more outrageous in their design. The American Southeast established itself as the heartland of putting activity, with Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, as its capital. There along a 50-mile stretch of Kings Highway miniature golf continues to reign supreme. As a result, the area has become a tourist destination for players from around the United States.⁸

Course Design

Certain elements of a typical miniature golf course mirror those of big golf. There is a teeing ground for each hole. This area can be defined by a vinyl mat with tee points or be merely the first level section of carpet or green. The fairway includes the putting green and other landscape features between the tee and the hole. Standard obstacles along the green may include sand traps, water hazards (usually brilliant disinfectant blue), swales, mounds, undulations, and encroaching rough (gravel and Astroturf are often used). Greens may feature banks or other modulations in the land to redirect a ball in play or change its speed. Both physical and visual barriers which disrupt the line of play are common. Use of jogs and doglegs in the design of greens is also a favored approach. A version of the clubhouse, where “greens fees” are paid, brightly-colored balls and putters are chosen, and score cards with tiny pencils are issued, is often the only full-sized example of architecture on the course proper. As grand or whimsical as a course may be, the clubhouse is most often a simple shack, with its only



The loop-di-loop, a classic hazard developed in the 1920s.

ornament large signs concerning behavior and the rules of play.

Components of the small sport, unknown to the big game, are many. Some miniature golf courses adopt a billiards approach to fairways, creating the opportunity to ricochet the ball off a bumper or other obstacle to minimize strokes to the hole. Tricky shortcuts, requiring skill

and daring, are also possible. As with many courses with moving obstacles, a second, longer way to the cup is usually offered for those feint-of-heart. Arguably the piece-de-resistance in the design of mid-to-late 20th-century courses is the bi-level or tri-level green with water hazards. A player must send the ball into one or more cups connected by plastic pipe to another stage of the green, avoiding swiftly moving areas of water and the potential loss of the ball along the way.

Courses as Cultural Resources

Evaluating miniature golf courses poses some difficulties. Compared with its one-time competitor, the movie theater, the history and evolution of properties associated with this American recreation are woefully under-documented. And, not surprisingly, much of the existing research, while excellent, focuses on the fascinating social and “artistic” nature of the phenomenon rather than the specifics of design that architectural historians crave.

Research suggests that all the earliest putting courses have been destroyed. What remains from the 1930s era is unclear, though the oldest courses typically seen along the road across America today appear to date from the second phase of popularity. Most of these have been altered to one degree or another to remain fashionable. The ready availability of new and recycled components, such as fiberglass figures and other novelties, adds to the complexity of dating an individual course and evaluating its integrity. Though greatly different in scale, for purposes of analysis the amusement park is perhaps the resource type most akin to the miniature golf course.

Links to the Future

A third wave of putting enthusiasm began in the 1970s and continues to influence the courses being constructed today. The greens of the last 20 years—the Steven Spielberg/George Lucas era—tend to create a “stage” for play. These new courses most often employ one coherent theme (Jungle, Pirate, Safari), extreme terrain (man-made mountains and caves), waterfalls and lagoons, and special effects (lights and sound). Obstacles and tricks emblematic of the game, like loop-di-loops and waterwheels, are fast being retired in favor of more high-tech and “maintenance-free” devices. Miniature golf, in one form or another, appears to be here to stay. The soft-serve cones may taste just as good in the future, but I’ll miss the windmills.

Notes

- 1 John Margolies, *Miniature Golf* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987), 14-15. A plan and photograph of “Thistle Dhu,” from *Country Life*, 1920, are illustrated.
- 2 Ibid. 22-24. Margolies describes Fairyland as a “storybook playground for millionaires.” Besides the inn, the resort included an impressive swimming pool, 10 guest cottages known as “Mother Goose Village,” tennis courts, and nationally-famous golf links.
- 3 The course was demolished in 1958, four years after Garnet Carter’s death. Chester H. Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985). 151.
- 4 Margolies, 32.
- 5 Chester H. Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 145.
- 6 Interview with Ralph Lomma, September 14, 2000. The first Lomma course was destroyed by the construction of an interstate highway in 1962. For the past 20 years, Lomma has also offered specially-designed indoor-only courses. Indoor miniature golf is now one third of the company’s business. There are 6,500 Lomma golf courses worldwide.
- 7 Ibid. 74-76. Don Clayton was a strong advocate of miniature golf as a serious, competitive sport. Putt-Putt Golf® courses feature long fairways and straight shots with no tricks or gimmicks, much like the earliest versions of the game. The first Putt-Putt® course opened in Fayetteville, North Carolina in 1954, and the company continues to thrive today with 260 locations.
- 8 John Margolies, *Fun Along the Road: American Tourist Attractions* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998) 104.

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