

La Rinconada Country Club
1929-1981

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La Rinconada Country Club has a colourful and interesting history. However, a complete history of the club has never been written. In this paper I have compiled and conducted my own reserach to write the most complete history of La Rinconada Country club to date. The topics I have covered in this paper are: what was there before La Rinconada Country Club; the formation of La Rinconada C.C.; and club life, image, improvemets, contributions to the community, and activities through out the life of La Rinconada C.C.

What Was There Before La Rinconada Country Club?

La Rinconada Country Club sits on a piece of land which used to be part of the Rancho Rinconada de Los Gatos(Corner of the Cats Ranch).(7) In 1840, Jose Hernandez, of San Jose, looked for a place to build a rancho, so he could move his family away from he what thought was an over crowded San Jose. One day, while

* documentation refers to numbered materials in bibliography.

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looking at some property, in what is now the Los Gatos-Saratoga area, he came across the home of two wildcats. He knew water must be near since the cats built their home there. Hernandez also loved the surrounding area, and he decided to build his rancho there. On May 21, 1840, Jose Hernandez and a friend, Sebastian Peralta, applied for a land grant. Later that year, Governor Alvarado awarded the grant. Hernandez built his rancho along the San Tomas Aquino Creek, and his house still stands today. The rancho now is a private residence located on 14610 Outio Road.(4) Hernandez derived the name "Rancho Rinconada de Los Gatos" from the bend in Los Gatos Creek, and the number of wildcats that lived in the area. In 1854, the U.S. Land Grant Commission confirmed the rancho, and a patent in 1860 confirmed the rancho as having 6631.44 acres of land, which covered parts of Los Gatos, Saratoga, and Campbell.(2)

Hernandez began to sell parts of his rancho in parcels. One such parcel he sold to a group of people who would later form the town of Los Gatos.(4) Also in these times of exchanging property, the land on which La Rinconada now stands changed hands a few times. In 1926, a man named W.B. Maxwell bought a piece of land near Vasona

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Junction to build a golf course. Two years later Maxwell sold the land to a group of Los Gatos businessmen, who would later form La Rinconada Country Club.(3)

The Formation of La Rinconada Country Club

La Rinconada Country Club evolved out of an idea expressed in the Los Gatos Times on September 6, 1906. The paper suggested that a country club in Los Gatos would entertain and attract more summertime visitors. The club should include a golf course, tennis courts, a race track and a clubhouse to hold social events.(3,5) The newspaper attempted to organize a club at this time, Rinconada Golf Club, but lack of public interest killed the idea.

The Lomita Golf Club opened on May 5, 1905, near Austin Corners. The club had a total of eighty members, and offered its facilities to both public and member use. The Lomita Golf Club folded a few months later, because not enough of the public used the course for it to operate soundly.(3) At the turn of the century, the people of Los Gatos obviously did not want a country club.

Twenty one years later, in the spring of 1926, W.B. Maxwell bought some land near Vasona Junction to build a

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golf course.(3) Maxwell worked for two years on the course, primarily using his own money, until a group of Los Gatos businessmen bought the land from him on February 17, 1928. The group, headed by W.C. Sprague, a retired Standard Oil executive, plus two of his associates, J.L. Pendleton and W.M. Gedfry, bought the land for 75,000 dollars.(1,3) Maxwell had run out of money, and could not continue to work on his course.

Sprague and his committee confrimed the club in March of 1928, with one hundred and three members. Memberships to the club cost five hundred dollars a piece. Club elections were also held. The results were as follows: W.C. Sprague, President; J.U. Higginbotham, 1st Vice-President; Senator Sanborn Young, 2nd Vice-President; Wendell Thomas, 3rd-Vice President; and I.D. Mabie, Treasurer.(3)

Opening Day

La Rinconada Country Club officially opened on June 1st, 1929. The San Jose Mercury Herald gives an account of the opening day ceremonies in their Sunday June 2nd, 1929, edition. A copy of the article still hangs on the wall in

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the men's grillroom. Opening day at La Rinconada C.C. attracted over seven hundred people, including A.F. Giannini and J.D. Bacigalhupi, who both belonged to the club. The ceremonies started off with the first official tour of the golf course. Many unofficial tours of the course had been given in May to some members, plus the first unofficial match, played between I.D. Mabie and L.H. Neuman. After the tour of the course, the temporary clubhouse served refreshments and lunch.(7) Next, Senator Sanborn Young, 2nd Vice-President, read a speech which officially opened the club, after W.C. Sprague had failed to show up for the opening day ceremonies. Sprague, the intended speaker, could not attend the opening day ceremonies for undisclosed reasons.(3) The San Jose Mercury Herald gave a good account of Senator Sanborn's speech in the following summary:

In his speech Young praised the the group of Los Gatos business men who were responsible for making La Rincinada golf course a reality. In turn Young lauded W.C. Sprague, Wendell C. Thomas, executive secutary; I.D. Mabie, treasurer; W.B. Maxwell, the founder of the course; and J.U. Higinbotham, director.(6)

La Rinconada C.C. golf professional's, Ben Coltrin and

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Phillip Jefferson, played the Hillview C.C. golf pro's, Aurthur Brooks and Floyd Hudson for the opening day exhibition match; the days main event. After a neck and neck competition, Phillip Jefferson won the game for La Rinconada by sinking a bridie on the 18th hole.(7) La Rinconada officials named Phillip Jefferson golf pro on that day, and he remained the pro until his death in 1946.(3)

La Rinconada C.C. allowed both public and private play on their course, which many consider one of the finest in the state. The eighteen hole golf course started by the clubhouse, with both 9th and 18th holes finishing up at the clubhouse. Public patrons could also enjoy the swimming pool in the summer. Club members had the benefits of clubhouse, which included locker rooms, the various social functions held at the clubhouse, and discount prices for ther club facilities.(7) However, La Rinconada did not have the race track or the tennis courts which the Los Gatos Times had suggested in 1901, but the club did fulfill the dream expressed in the paper twenty eight years before.

The Early Years: 1929 - 1941

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La Rinconada C.C. seemed unaffected by the Great Depression if one reads the club's newspaper Out-of-the-Ditch. The newspaper reported on upcoming golf and social events, plus results of the latest tournaments, and other club related news.(8)

Ladies' golf also received a great deal of attention for a typically male dominated club. (No woman has ever held a club office in the club's history.) A good percentage of the golfing news in the club's newspaper pertained to women's golf. The women organized Ladies' 9 hole and 18 hole golf clubs, which still meet weekly. They also held fashion shows in the clubhouse, and sat on committees to organize certain social events.(8) So the wives of La Rinconada golfers were active in the early years of the club, however, a woman could not join the club. Her husband must be a member of the club in order for her to use the facilities.(7) Just as the members wives were active, so were their sons.

Every summer the club held Junior League Golfing. All boys, over twelve, could participate. The summer league ended with the Junior League Golf Tournament and Barbecue, held in August.(8) All boys over the age of twelve could use the golf course, as long as they registered at the pro

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shop and obeyed the rules set down by the National Golfers Association.(7)

La Rinconada C.C. also offered Los Gatos High School use of the course, which school officials gratefully accepted. The school had wanted a golf team for a long time, but they had no place to practice. In January of 1940, Los Gatos High School held their first tournament at La Rinconada.(8)

Out of the many golf tournaments held at La Rinconada, the Blossom Tournament, held in either April or early May, and the Los Gatos Fiesta Tournament, held in August, drew the most attention. Both of these tournaments attracted golfers from around the state, but La Rinconada golfers usually won. The Blossom Tournament received its name from the blossoming fruit trees which covered the valley at that time. In fact, orchards surrounded the club itself.(8) La Rinconada still holds the tournament today inspite of the almost total absence of the orchards. La Rinconada totality conscived the idea for the Los Gatos Fiesta Tournament, as they did with the Blossom Tournament, however the Fiesta Tournament drew a lot more people. During the tournaments heyday, the middle and late thirties, it kept the whole town busy. In fact, some

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people and merchants had to start preparations a month in advance.(8) The Fiesta turned out to be the largest event of the year at La Rinconada C.C. There is no record of the Fiesta Tournament held in recent years.

The War Years: 1942 - 1946

During World War II, La Rinconada Country Club almost folded; there were many other clubs which did. The war effort kept most of the members away from the club. Some of the members fought in the war. The rest who stayed (bank presidents and other professional made up a large part of La Rinconada's membership) kept the war effort going here in the states. Since many members could not use the club, they terminated their memberships. Others felt their money belonged in war bonds, instead of country clubs.(7) By 1945 the club came close to financial ruin, and it would have gone under if it had not of been for golfer-dentist Sol Leider. Leider bought the club in 1945 for 80,000 dollars.(3)

Another problem arose during WWII. The oak trees on the golf course contracted Oak Root fungus from constant summertime waterings. Oak Trees like arid summers, not wet ones. Eucalyptus trees replaced the oak trees, along with

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some Monterey pines planted along the 16th, 17th, and 18th fairways.(7)

Women's golf dominated the club's newspaper during these years. After 1942 only a handful of men's golfing could be found, and all men's tournaments ceased. The newspaper also included letters from members fighting in the war. Almost every letter contained the same message: "We're making great progress over here, and keep the war effort going back home."(8)

The Post-War Years: 1947 - 1952

In the years after World War II, the club, now under the ownership of Dr. Leider, began to return to normal.(7) Men's golf started up again, along with the resurrection of the Blossom and Fiesta Tournaments.(8) Some members came back to the club, but others preferred to stay out. The club had a new feel to it. It resembled the La Rinconada of the thirties in some respects, but the club continued to grow and change.(7)

Several years after WWII, the club became a large financial burden for Dr. Leider. Dr. Leider along with his wife Esther, leased the land to a group of members. The

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lease, entered on November 7th, 1952, states that La Rinconada C.C. Inc. is a non-profit organization, and has a life of ninety nine years.(7)

The Private Years: 1953 - 1970

La Rinconada, now member owned, closed its doors to public play.(3) The club also began to promote a new image, as an exclusive members only club. Visitors and prospective members could use course, as long as they were accompanied by a member.(7)

The club also converted to yearly elections, with Bill Battaglia, as the club's first president under the new ownership.(7)

Applying for memberships now became more restricted. In order to become a new member, one must have the qualifications to fit into a "select group." All accepted members did fit into this "select group." To become a member one must fill out an application form. Then, a membership review board considers the application. Sometimes further investigating an applicant's family background, religion, and financial status. The club designed such an extensive investigation of each applicant

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to keep any "undesirables" out of the club.(9)

Some of these members in this select group happened to be famous movie actors and actresses. People like Bing Crosby, Jack Benny, Joanne Fontane, Jane Russell, Olivia de Havilland, and Betty Davis belonged to La Rinconada C.C. Most of the actors, such as Bing Crosby, have been known to belong to exclusive clubs, like Pebble Beach, so why did they belong to La Rinconada? Besides having what many consider the finest golf course in northern California, during the fifties and sixties, La Rinconada Country Club emerged as one of the most exclusive clubs in the state. The celebrities acted the same as any other La Rinconada member. They participated in golf tournaments, ate at the Sunday night buffets, attended the dinner dances, and even held their own special events. Jane Russell was noticed for a couple of fashion shows she held at the club.(9) (Note- the rules which restricted women from joining the club directly also restricted the actresses. In order for any female celebrities to use the club, her husband had to join the club.)(7)

Deer, and other wild animals, constantly visited La Rinconada C.C. in the early and middle life of the club. A fence, put up in the late fifties, constructed around the

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club kept the animals out.(9)

During a rainstorm, in the fall of 1962, the roof caved in on the spanish styled clubhouse. The accident happened on a Sunday night just after the kitchen help had finished cleaning up. After considering the costs of repairing the clubhouse, members decided to build a new one. A canvas, drawn across the hole in the roof, enabled the kitchen crew to continue work until a new clubhouse could be built.(9) In the spring of 1963, La Rinconada Country Club opened their new clubhouse. The new clubhouse sits five-hundred feet north of the old clubhouse (which is now part of the parking lot). The new structure contained a larger dining room, kitchen, men's grillroom, plus both men's and women's locker rooms. Along with a new clubhouse some other additons and changes took place on the club property: the addition of a snack-shack on the 11th hole; the pro-shop moved from the old clubhouse to the west side of the parking lot; and the exchange of the 1st and 6th holes, so the golfers can start at the 1st tee by the pro shop instead of by the clubhouse.(7)

Around 1966 housing started to pop-up around the club. Prior to this time, the club had been surrounded by orchards. The home building, which took place in the

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sixties, accounts for all of the nice neighborhoods in the La Rinconada area.(9)

In 1968, La Rinconada C.C. made an agreement with the Santa Clara County Conservation District. The Conservation District obtained the water right of ways through the 3rd and 18th fairways, in exchange for giving La Rinconada C.C. all of the untreated water needed for watering its golf course. Prior to this time, the club had experienced difficulties with water supply and distribution problems.(7)

Changing Times: 1971 - 1981

In the early seventies, the club again grew in size. For the previous twenty years, La Rinconada Country Club had a constant membership of about one hundred. Under a new clubhouse manager, La Rinconada C.C. opened up more memberships with more relaxed standards, including, for the first time, corporate membership. Rising operating costs caused the call for raising the membership.(9) By 1976 the club had grown to about four hundred members, and by January 1981, about six hundred.(7,9) Many of the old members felt insulted by the influx of new members, so they

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left. By the mid-seventies all of the movie stars had also left.(9)

A golf cart path system, completed in 1974, accounted for the only additon to the club in the seventies. The path system came to the aide of those who needed carts in order to play golf.(7)

Today, La Rinconada is still a golfer's country club. From my observations, I've worked in the kitchen at La Rinconada for the last nine months, I can say that almost every La Rinconada member is a golfing fanatic. They are in the men's grillroom early each morning eating breakfast, including Sundays, and out on the course all day. If rain threatens, they'll be out there, even in heavy drizzle. On Sunday nights they come to the buffet with their families, and bring their wives, or dates, to the friday night dinner-dances.

The expansion of the club also brought a "here, there and back again" aperance. From a private and public course (here), to a private exclusive members only club (there), to a expanded member, less exculsive club, which allowed more of the public to join (and back again.) La Rinconada agian belonged to the members who lived in the area, and not the movie stars who would drop by once a

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month for a quick golf game and a bite to eat.

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