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TSG SPOTLIGHT

EAGLES MERE COUNTRY CLUB

By Nate Oxman, Staff Writer

When the uncertainty of early spring gives way to more favorable weather, the fortunate in the tri-state area begin to get the itch. They may have made occasional visits in the offseason, for holiday traditions or winter festivals, but those were most likely scattered at best. As May draws near, weekend treks become routine and then, when Memorial Day rings in another summer season, Philadelphians flee for their vacation homes.

Many venture over the bridge and head south on the A.C. Expressway to the Jersey Shore, shoot up the northeast extension of the turnpike to the Poconos or take I-95 south to the Delaware beaches.

Another group continues a tradition that for most families began many generations ago and makes the pilgrimage to a small mountain village in northeast Pennsylvania known as Eagles Mere.

From its slogans as “the last unspoiled resort” and “the town time forgot” to its location high in the Endless Mountains, abutting Worlds End State Park, there’s an otherworldly aura to this sparsely-populated section of the Allegheny Plateau.

These, and its tranquil namesake lake of course, must have been what those at the helm wanted to showcase when they decided to shift the focus in the region from glass production to tourism toward the end of the 19th century.

THE BEGINNING

This change led to the construction of four hotels between 1880 and 1900 surrounding the centerpiece attraction: the 130-acre lake, formed by a glacier and adorned with a beach. It would become a place for swimming, sunbathing, and sailing, and serves those purposes and much more today.

It also led to the construction of the Eagles Mere Railroad in 1892, which would help take scores of tourists from the Williamsport and North Branch Railroad stop at Sonestown more than 1,000 feet up the mountain to Eagles Mere.

And in 1896 it was aided by the arrival of the Eagles Mere Chautauqua, which ran annually each August through 1902, operating in the area that is now the Eagles Mere Park neighborhood. Extremely popular in rural America at the time, this satellite chautauqua, modeled after New York’s Chautauqua Institution, gave thousands of visitors the chance to combine vacation and education in a type of closed-off community for an extended time each summer. Among the offerings for children and adults during the day were classes in education, music, painting, language, science, swimming and rowing. Nights were filled with lectures and concerts. Sundays were for religious practices.

The Chautauqua, spearheaded by cousins

Harvey Welch and C.W. Woddrop, an early Eagles Mere pioneer and member of the Eagles Mere Athletic Association that preceded the golf club, expanded each year thanks in part to the opening of the Chautauqua Inn, the first in the town with modern conveniences, and eventually shifted its focus to be less about learning and more about entertainment and relaxation. This matched the nationwide vacation trend at the time for the upper crust and although the Eagles Mere Chautauqua was short-lived, it left its mark in many ways. The bell that chimed to begin and end each day now sits in the Village Green. The illuminated fleet, a parade of decorated boats on the lake, is now August’s annual Water Carnival. And the Chautauqua Inn became the Forest Inn, which continued to help the rise of Eagles Mere as a vacation destination.

The hotel boom provided the accommodations, the railroad construction the transportation and the Chautauqua period a firmer foundation. Together, they helped pave the way for Eagles Mere’s popularity surge. Not only did vacationers begin coming from Philadelphia, but from Williamsport, Bloomsburg, Pittsburgh, Harrisburg, Baltimore, Wilmington, Del., Washington D.C., New York and Ohio among others. And they came in droves.

GOLF ON THE MOUNTAIN

About a decade after the Chautauqua ended, the more than 1,100 hotel rooms in Eagles Mere were routinely filled thanks in large part to the presence of golf on the mountain.

As golf was finding its footing in the U.S. as a leisure time activity, it’s natural that Eagles Mere visitors expressed an interest in experimenting with the game. Some of those folks formed the Eagles Mere Golf Club and stretched the few “pasture golf” holes across Pennsylvania Avenue from the Hotel Raymond overlooking the lake into a bare bones 9-hole, 1,301-yard course in 1898 called the Eagles Mere Golf Links.

As the hotels began to promote the golf course and the game’s popularity continued to climb, it was realized that upgrades were going to be necessary.

In 1909, the Eagles Mere Athletic Association, a group that included the hotel owners, formed to “supervise all sports activity on the mountaintop, including golf,” writes Joe Mosbrook in his book *Breaking 100: The First Century of The Eagles Mere Country Club*. A plan was set to purchase some farmland and build a clubhouse close to town and a county fair fundraiser was held, but nothing came to fruition.

Two years later, however, in Sept. of 1911, a new Eagles Mere Golf Club was formed, again composed of hotel owners as well as summer residents, and plans for the construction of a new course were made with the goal of opening before the following summer vacation season. Mosbrook writes, “They selected a site about a half-mile southwest of the center of the village along the road to Muncy Valley.”

The Avery family farm site, according to Mosbrook’s citation of a 1927 *Golf Illustrated* article, “...was filled with innumerable rocks of every size, fallen trees and stumps.” These obstacles contributed to an arduous 12-year construction timeline. Six holes opened in 1913, holes that still exist today (currently #s 1-5, 18), and vacationers crammed the course daily, prompting the continuation of the expansion plan.

FLYNN ARRIVES FROM PHILLY

In 1914, the club joined the USGA and hired its first golf professional, Joe Higgins from Ireland, who spent a few years in the position and returned to serve as the groundskeeper from 1941 to 1963. The following year, Merion Golf Club Superintendent William Flynn arrived, designed three new holes



(currently #s 5, 16, 17) and made adjustments to some of the original six.

The new 9-hole course that opened ready for play in 1916 became even more popular and the hotels, which began offering carriage rides from their front door up the mountain to the golf course to service their guests, reaped the rewards.

As Mosbrook cites in the *Williamsport Gazette* from August 14, 1916, “Every hotel is filled to the roof and it was necessary on Saturday to turn away people who had not taken the precaution to secure accommodations in advance. A number of these returned home, while others went down to Sonestown where they acquired temporary accommodations, hoping to be admitted later to one of the Eagles Mere hotels.”

Rather than rest on its recent success, the club continued to push forward, planning for the addition of a second nine holes. Similar to the first nine, the second was constructed in stages under the direction of Flynn. After five of those holes (currently #s 7, 12-15) opened in the summer of 1918 following extensive tree and rock removal, the golf course began attracting national attention. Mosbrook notes that a *Washington Post* ad dubbed it “one of the finest golf courses in America.” Five summers later, the full 18 was ready for play.

The finished product (1923) showcased Flynn’s artistry, specifically his ability to use the natural terrain to create great golf holes that stand the test of time. Notable examples at Eagles Mere include the sixth, a tumbling par-4 that features a gorgeous downhill approach shot over a sizable rock outcropping and the ninth, a daunting par 3 that *Golf Digest* once touted as one of the most scenic in the country, with its mountainous backdrop said to afford views all the way to New York State, as well as the green some 88 feet below.

Unique features like the “fairies’ ballroom,” a large flat rock in the 13th fairway, the steep Billy Goat hill on the 16th with stone steps leading up to the green, and Higgins’ Alley, a short-grass kickboard on the left side of the 18th

fairway that could add 50 yards to a well-placed tee shot all added to Eagles Mere’s charm.

Word continued to spread about Flynn’s fine craftsmanship in Eagles Mere and the course remained very popular among hotel guests, especially after the road up the mountain from the hotels to the golf course was finished being paved in 1924. It was so popular that it created a pair of problems.

PROBLEMS & SOLUTIONS

First, the course became severely overcrowded, sometimes hosting up to 200 players in a single day!

The solution was a simple one: build another golf course. So the club purchased property immediately to the west of the first course and Flynn, who was well on his way to making a lasting mark as a golf course architect and would later have his hand in powerhouses like Shinnecock Hills, Cherry Hills and Pine Valley, was hired to draw up plans for another 18 holes.

And those plans did not disappoint. As Mosbrook writes, “It began near the second green of the first course and was laid out on land that featured a total elevation change of an astounding 280 feet. On this land Flynn designed holes that dropped as much as 180 feet from tee to green and others that climbed 130 feet. The elevation changes were much more dramatic than those on the very hilly first course.”

The first five holes of the second course opened in 1927, including the eye-popping 370-yard par-4 opener that plummeted 110 feet from tee to green. The remaining four holes of the front nine opened the following summer and the 10th hole two years later.

Then the stock market crashed, the Great Depression ensued, and the second course was abandoned after 1934, although the second hole of the course would be converted into a practice range in 1977. While the first course still received steady play, it was no longer busting at the seams. Problem solved.

Problem #2 was a lack of caddies on the mountain. Although the golf cart was just coming into the picture, there were only a few at Eagles Mere. It’s safe to say most vacationers wouldn’t have been too keen on carrying their golf bag up and down the mountain course.

But the solution was fairly simple: use the club’s Philadelphia connection to bring caddies to Eagles Mere. The club created Camp Kerodoki and recruited members of the Boy Scouts of Philadelphia to the mountain each

summer. Tents were constructed to the right of the fifth fairway and boys were trained to caddy while they continued to earn their merit badges. The program lasted for 35 years, sometimes featuring as many as 70 boy scouts in a summer (Mosbrook).

The golf professional at this time was a Philly native named Clarence Ehresman, who tied for 50th in the 1934 U.S. Open at Merion, competed in three other U.S. Opens, four PGA Championships and shot a course-record 63 at Eagles Mere. His successor, Walter Work, did the same in 1939, including a 29 on the front nine.

Although the Hotel Raymond had burnt down in 1941 and was never rebuilt, the remaining hotels, and in turn the golf course, stayed busy throughout the 40s and into the early 50s, continuing to service well over 100 players per day throughout the peak summer season. But as vacationers started venturing elsewhere, the hotels, whose owners had been major supporters of the golf course, began to suffer. The financial health of the golf course did as well and bankruptcy appeared imminent. But as would become custom moving forward, a dedicated group of members stepped up, helped erase the debt with personal donations, and reorganized as Eagles Mere Country Club in 1955. It was technically private, but hotel guests still had access to the club. Although, more change was about to take place.

CAUSE & EFFECT

Beginning in 1959 the number of golf carts at Eagles Mere CC increased until they virtually replaced the caddie program over the next decade. One of the final loopers was Jay Brunza, a King's College student at the time, who would go on to become Dr. Jay Brunza,

Tiger Woods' caddie during his amateur days as well as his psychologist.

Five of the area hotels closed their doors between then and 1970, unable to make enough of a profit in the summer months to sustain their year-round operation.

As Mosbrook writes, "With the hotels gone, the country club, like all of Eagles Mere, was hanging in limbo. The future of the longtime resort community was in jeopardy. ... Eagles Mere was facing a major challenge of reinventing itself. So was the country club."

The lost revenue from hotel guests caused course conditions to suffer, but again the membership responded in a big way.

Mosbrook quotes former president Bob Zelten, "There were some old-timers who apparently kept the club alive. They asked, 'How much is our deficit this year?' And five or six guys would chip in the deficit. That's the way the club ran."

MOVING FORWARD

These members helped the club (and the village) transition from the resort-style operation that led to so much success in its first 60 years to the cottage community that still runs strongly today.

"I've always heard those stories and I don't have any reason not to believe they are true," said Art Pursel, Jr., the club's president. "I think people become so passionate about the place that they are very willing to make sure that it continues to survive and even thrive. And I've witnessed that myself in a few circumstances as well, not just with the club but with other things in the community. People are also very, very committed to the town."

Overlooking Eagles Mere Lake are a number of Victorian-style getaways with their own endearing names like At Ease, Stepping

Stone, Huckle Chuckle, Neverland, Pineapple, Pinecone and Tall Trees. Many are cottages in name only, stretching over 4,000 square feet and standing tall overlooking the lake. Some are even available for rent (robinrealestate.com).

Head Professional George Corcoran and his wife, Alliene, also helped guide the club through this difficult stretch. Corcoran, the brother of Fred Corcoran who managed professional golfers like Babe Zaharias and Sam Snead, was a dedicated teacher of the game who had instruction pieces featured in Sports Illustrated. He ran a very successful junior golf program during his 15 years at Eagles Mere (1969-1983), and began the weekly Turkey Shoot that still exists today, while Alliene helped resurrect the Ladies' Golf Association at the club.

Eagles Mere's officers played major roles as well. Bill Albertini, president from 1987-1989, was instrumental in helping Eagles Mere honor its past while preparing for its future. Among his achievements was helping the club construct a new pro shop that opened in 1987.

Mosbrook quotes former club manager Dean Homer: "Bill was the guiding light. He was the smartest man on the mountain and had a gift to get things done. He could talk to anybody – the richest guy in town as well as the kid working on the sand traps. He was responsible for almost everything. He brought us into the real world."

Current President Art Pursel and the board of directors continue that today, filling their mothers' and fathers' former roles.

"I think that's one of the unique things about the place," said Pursel, whose family has been a part of the community for five generations. "My folks didn't formally sit me down and talk to me about becoming



Dating back to 1887, the Eagles Mere Inn offers affordable stay and play packages in cooperation with Eagles Mere Country Club.

involved when I got older. I would say that it just happened naturally. And by the way it continues to happen simply because young people have the ability to interact with adults on a regular basis. I had mentors like Bill Albertini who got me involved."

Golf Chairman Steve Ryan's family traces their roots all the way back to Henry E. Kirk, Sr. one of the club's founders and owner of the Lakeside Hotel.

"I felt it was my role in the family to get us back to Eagles Mere," said Ryan, who returned to the community about 20 years ago. "We're thrilled and are extremely lucky. It's more than a second home. It's a magical place and now with our grandchildren, they're eighth generation and that's pretty neat to be able to say that."

Much like Pursel and other past presidents, Eagles Mere's long line of highly committed golf professionals have continued to ensure the membership at all levels remains active. Fred Pacacha succeeded Corcoran and remained in the position for 26 years. Pursel witnessed their dedication firsthand, working in the pro shop under both as a youth. Seth Kanaskie, a native of nearby Danville, followed Pacacha and continued to grow all of the golf programs by bringing back the junior club championship, adding beginner ladies' clinics, a two-day member-member and a member-guest tournament.

Although current pro, Daniel Taylor, is only in his second season at the club, his relationship with this special place extends back much farther.

During his search for a peaceful escape and some outdoor recreation to celebrate his dating anniversary in 2010, Taylor stumbled upon Eagles Mere. He and his now wife, Kristen, were smitten. They etched their names in the wooden bridge at "Waters Meet" on the Rickett's Glen Falls Trail. They found that same spot on their return visit in 2015 and they found it once again in 2019 when Taylor

decided to pursue Eagles Mere's open head golf professional position.

STAYING POWER

After spending more than a decade combined in his previous positions at Medford Village CC in South Jersey and Wilmington CC in Delaware, Taylor couldn't ignore the opportunity to come to Eagles Mere.

"Something was calling me here," said Taylor. "I couldn't deny it."

And it didn't take Taylor long to understand why so many before him have experienced the same magnetic pull.

"It's the nostalgia of the place," said Taylor. "People come here to continue a tradition that for many of them started generations ago. They stay in the same cottages or cabins that they did when they were a kid. They grew up sailing on the lake, swimming, participating in sports week. This place has staying power."

Case in point current Superintendent Don Keefer. Ever since his arrival in 1984, Keefer has been credited with a significant improvement in course conditions. The golf course (6,210 yards, par 70) saw only small changes here and there after it was completed in 1923 with the relocation of some greens and tees and the addition of a few bunkers. But the club has been a little more active under Keefer, who has helped with tee expansion and elevation, bunker renovation, green rebuilding and the installation of a new irrigation system in the late 90s thanks to member Charlie Brogan. The project included a collection pond that created the course's very first water hazard fronting the fifth tee and adjacent 18th green.

Flynn was a strong opponent of artificial hazards. At Eagles Mere, he allowed the rollicking terrain to create challenges for golfers, often asking them to move the ball in the opposite direction than the one the lie dictates. Exposed rock, dips and swales left from thousands of trees and boulders extracted during construction, blind shots,

and of course the extreme elevation changes all add intrigue as well.

While Eagles Mere CC remains private, access is available to visitors in several ways.

The Eagles Mere Inn, a bed and breakfast that dates to 1887 and was recently renovated, is located in the heart of the village and offers access to the golf course, Eagles Mere Lake, which features canoe and boat rentals and a popular beach, and free admission to the Eagles Mere Air and Auto Museums. Information about stay and play packages is available at eaglesmerecc.com.

Eagles Mere CC, which also features fabulous dining options, tennis, pickleball, and a fitness center, offers a wide variety of affordable membership options including trial memberships for those initial visitors looking to experience Eagles Mere themselves, as well as temporary and seasonal memberships to cater to both short-term and long-term summer vacationers.

The town, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, offers an array of quaint shopping and dining options and is nearby to some of Pennsylvania's most scenic outdoor recreation sites in Worlds End State Park, Ricketts Glen State Park, and Loyalsock State Forest.

"There are so many different activities here if you're an outdoors person in any capacity," said Ryan. "There's a lot do on the water: sailing, canoeing, kayaking, paddleboarding. There are a lot of nature trails and hiking trails. There's golf. There's a very strong, a very active tennis program. It's great."

It all adds up to one of the tri-state area's most unique experiences.

"It's definitely a special place," said Pursel. "That's what keeps families coming back for generations. It just kind of gets into your DNA and people make it a part of their lives." **TSG**

Form more information:

EAGLESMECECC.COM

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*Research for this article came from Joe Mosbrook's *Breaking 100: The First Century of The Eagles Mere Country Club* as well as Wayne Morrison's and Tom Paul's *The Nature Faker*.

The picturesque par-4 6th at Eagles Mere Country Club awaits. Photo courtesy of EMCC