

Courses with CHARACTER

A handful of truly quirky, unusual courses exist well under the radar screen in the Met Area

BY CHUCK STOGEL

At first glance, the listing looks and reads like other real estate particulars for luxurious homes with sizeable property in the Hamptons: Quaker Hill and Hammersley Hill, nestled on an elevated, fertile plateau in eastern Dutchess County, N.Y., the hamlet of Quaker Hill sits three miles east of Pawling Village. It was here that the late Lowell Thomas, a world-renowned traveler, adventurer, collector, broadcaster, writer and editor, set up his home and base of operations.

A sports devotee – he sponsored a traveling softball team called the Nine Old Men – Thomas was likewise an avid golfer who in the early 1940s engaged friend and architect Robert Trent Jones to design two separate courses for himself and guests.

The first of the two layouts is now known as Quaker Hill Country Club. It's a nine-holer, with distinctly separate teeing areas to form 18 holes, which opened in 1941. Overall, the course measures 6,110 yards with a par of 35-35-70.

"It's a very playable, but very challenging course," said Tony Vos, who's been the head pro since 2000. "You never get bored. The greens, particularly, require a lot of local knowledge."

With a membership of just 150 families, the club prides itself on its friendly atmosphere, "affordability" and not having advance tee times. Facilities include tennis, a well-maintained croquet layout surrounded by ladder-back benches and, perhaps most notable of all, a 19th century barn converted into a clubhouse and museum.

The upstairs level of The Barn, as it is called, features a History of Civilization Fireplace in a great room with a stage and former projection room, and a well-preserved, intact, wood-paneled Studio Museum from which Thomas, who died in 1981, broadcast many of his radio

commentaries. His signature sign-on was, "Good evening, everybody," and his traditional sign-off was, "So long, until tomorrow."

If Quaker Hill was Thomas's playground and broadcast studio, Hammersley Hill was his residential estate. It too has, or had, a golf course. And just like Three Ponds Farm, it's also for sale.

Now owned by Edgar Bronfman Jr., the Seagram heir and entertainment entrepreneur, Hammersley Hill is less than a mile from the Quaker Hill club. Although the original mansion is gone, this is where Thomas lived and, in 1944, where architect Jones often stayed while he was crafting the IBM course now called Casperkill Country Club in nearby Poughkeepsie. Jones laid out six holes at Hammersley in 1944 and the parcel was expanded to a nine-hole routing 25 years later.

"It's quite a course. It really had excellent greens and some long, long holes," said Michael Liffland, the property manager who was hired in 1969 and has been on the scene ever since.

According to Liffland, one hole measured 870 yards with a par of 7 1/2, another hole stretched 640 yards, and with other holes bearing pars of 3 1/2 and 4 1/2, the nine holes had a cumulative par of 37 1/2. "Mr. Thomas assigned some unusual pars, with half-pars counting," said the property manager.

Apparently, a ball within a club length was a gimme for a half-stroke, or so legend has it. And who's to argue? Thomas was the owner and rules maker.

Liffland said he is still mowing 85 acres that comprised a portion of the course, and several greens are puttable, but nobody really plays there. The course, however, could easily be resurrected. Listed with realtors Houlihan Lawrence of Brewster, N.Y., the asking price is a modest \$15 million. ■

Chuck Stogel is a frequent contributor to *The Met Golfer*. He lives in White Plains, New York.

Babe Ruth was a regular at scenic Quaker Hill, and one photo in the clubhouse shows him arriving on a motorcycle.

