

Donald Ross – Scottish Roots

Monroe Golf Club-A Donald Ross Classic

This is the first of a series of Newsletter articles about the life and career of Donald J. Ross, the man who designed the golf course for Monroe Golf Club in 1923. Ross is generally acknowledged as the first man to ever earn a living as a golf architect and is credited with the design of almost 400 golf courses in the United States and Canada.

It seems the life story of Donald Ross could not have happened anywhere but in America. Granted, he was not born in the U.S., but he came to this country virtually penniless and through incredibly dedication to his work, became not only wealthy, but one of the most famous names of a sports-mad American generation

Donald James Ross was born in Dornoch, Scotland in 1872. His father was a stone cutter/mason and so it was no surprise that young Donald was expected to learn a trade. Apprenticed to a carpenter in town at the age of 14, Ross became quite talented at this craft. Golf, meanwhile, was already a sport in Scotland, although it was played on very crude grounds of sand and turf that was never cut, except for the greens. The players simply walked along and beat down the turf. Young Ross and his brother Alex took to the game at an early age, caddying for the locals and playing whenever they could sneak away from chores.

In 1886, Donald Ross met Old Tom Morris, the legendary greenkeeper of St. Andrews and a four time British Open Champion. Morris came to Dornoch to lay out a new, official 9-hole course and the 13 year-old Ross came under his spell. Ross was already putting his carpenter skills to good use making golf clubs for the local players and he jumped at the chance to move to St Andrews to work under Morris as an asst. greens keeper. Ross moved a year later to Carnoustie Golf Club. This story of how an older professional inspired Ross would be repeated 37 years later at Monroe when Robert Trent Jones, a 16 year old living in East Rochester, was hired as a laborer to work under Ross while Ross was building first Monroe, and then Oak Hill. Equally inspired, Jones decided that this was his life as well and entered Cornell University, where he designed his own major to prepare for the profession of a golf architect. With that magical link from Old Tom Morris to Ross to Jones, the stage was set for Jones to go on to become famous on his own as the first great American golf course architect.

In 1893, Ross, while still only 21, had learned and progressed so quickly that he was offered the job of head professional, club maker and keeper of the green at Dornoch. In his own notes, Ross said he would not “dignify the green keeper task by a real title, since I did little but clip the greens and care for the bunkers”. Ross continued in his diary: “and how I hated that part of the job. But as it turned out, it was the best training for my future”

For the next 5 years, Ross made his living at Dornoch, developing both his club making as well as his golfing skills. He became an accomplished golfer, ultimately playing in a combined 15 British and U.S. Opens, finishing in the top 10 in 5 of these tournaments. Then, in 1889, an encounter at Dornoch with a visiting American changed his life as well as the history of American golf.

Robert Wheeler a professor of astronomy at Harvard was visiting Dornoch for a summer holiday, including an extended golfing vacation. Impressed with Ross, he invited him to come to America, to work at Oakley Country Club, a golf club that he and others had just formed in Massachusetts. At age 26, armed with nothing more than this invitation, Donald Ross packed his bags in March of 1899 and sailed to America. He landed in New York with exactly \$2 dollars in his pocket so he walked from the pier to the railroad station, then road a train to Boston, emerging from the station with only pocket change to his name. He began work the next morning at Oakley Country Club in Watertown, Mass.

As unlikely as it seems, he would go on from that morning to become both famous and wealthy.

Next Chapter: Donald Ross moves from Greenskeeper to course designer

Donald Ross Excerpts from his Diary: ***Golf Has Never Failed Me.*** Copyright 1996 Sleeping Bear Press