

## **Interview with Russ Stillman in 1984**

**By Kerryn Scott.**

First played over 50 years ago when the Club was 9 holes and sand scrape greens. Didn't play much then as I was going to school, only a round or two to see what it was like. My parents played regularly and I could borrow an old club from them.

I first joined the club after it moved to its present site in 1935 and played regularly every weekend in the winter.

Since I've retired I play a lot, at least 2 or 3 times a week all the year round. More time to fill in now and I like the game, the exercise and the company of playing companions. There's about 6 or 7 retired gents gather at the course 3 times a week, rain or shine, for a game. They call us the Geriatrics Club. One of them is 80 years old this month and never misses a day and gets around as good as anyone. Still plays well too.

I had a hole in one on the 8<sup>th</sup> about 20 years ago.

Positions – Captain & Handicapper for about 10 years to 1963, and President 4 years 1967 – 70.

During these years the watering system was installed in 1961 and the new club house purchased and sited in 1967/8. Made a Life Member about that time.

Two other life members

- Mr. L H Thompson, retired Shire Engineer, was made a life member for his work for the club over many years. He designed and supervised the installation of the water scheme. Some years previously when the club could not fill offices for the year, a public meeting was called to decide whether to carry on or not. Mr Thompson offered to take over as Course Manager for the year and the club got going successfully again.
- Mr. A J Swanston (Jack) has been President and Course Manager for several years, when he made many improvements to the course.

My handicap is 12. I will always play. I won't give up until my rheumatics stop me from swinging a club or I can't walk around the course.

The first course was established about in the early 20's, on what was later known as the Gun Club Paddock, where Mr Tate now lives, on Thornton Road. It was owned by Mr Chummie Armstrong, father of Cliff Armstrong, whose property adjoins the present site. There was room for only 9 holes and the greens were sand scrapes. I don't know of everyone involved but Mr Ray Deal, Engineer at the local butter factory and Mr Tom O'Brian, Butter Factory Manager (brother of the late Bernie O'Brian of Ruoak) had something to do with it. Mr. W A Murray, farmer from Chrystal Creek was also involved. Very little planning or design was necessary as the paddock was flat with a few trees and a water course. There were no bunkers just

dirt mounds here and there and around scrapes. The Club House was a small shed on the hill about where Mr Tate's house now stands.

The club moved to its present site in 1935 to expand and have 18 holes. For the first two years we played on sand scrapes, which proved unsatisfactory due to rain washing and scouring the sand, so it was decided to construct grass greens. They weren't entirely satisfactory, as without water they died in the summer and were dependent on early rains, which often did not happen. (Since the water scheme in 1961 they improved rapidly).

The present site is 115 acres of crown land set aside for public recreation and administered by trustees, who are elected every three years at a public meeting. There is a cricket oval in the center, with a concrete wicket still there and cricket was played regularly. It was once the home ground for the Footballer's Cricket Club and Alexandra No 3 team. The present tenants are the Race Club and Golf Club.

The small shed from the Thornton Road course was transported to a site near the horse stalls and was shared by the Golf club in the winter season and the Race Club in summer.

Mr. Lance Thompson designed the course and it is considered a very good lay out and a good test of golf. It has remained almost in its original lay-out; Mr Thompson also designed the Mansfield Course and a couple of others in the Western District of Victoria. Originally there were over 600 large red gum trees on the area and many of these still remain. The course was designed round these trees to present difficulties.

It is not desirable to have a racetrack fence across fairways but I suppose it's also not suitable to have fairways across a race track, from the Race Club's point of view. But it happens in other country towns and both clubs manage OK. The race fence was originally wooden, with removable rails in certain places for the golf season but a few years ago was changed to a pipe with removable posts and rails at fairway crossings. These are removed in winter and replaced in summer for race meetings. Sometimes there's a mild argument about whose turn it is to put them up or take them down but generally the two clubs get along well. All the work over the years done by the Golf Club in the water scheme, drainage and grass improvement must benefit the Race Club. Likewise the many improvements by the Race Club in new track fencing and track resurfacing and maintenance benefit the Golf Club.

Originally the trustees leased the land by tender for the grazing of sheep and the grass greens were fenced for protection. The money thus raised, together with rent paid by the two clubs, was spent on improvements to the property, as the trustees are obliged not to make a profit or hold excess money. Later on, grazing was stopped and the fences removed. For a couple of years the area was let for grass hay cutting in the spring.

In 1967, my first year as president, the Club House was accidentally destroyed by fire. The site was near the horse stalls and the building was the old shed removed from the Thornton Road course, with a couple of skillions added.

In those days golf was played only in winter and the Race Club occupied the Club House in summer. All the golf equipment and fittings had to be stored for the race season and visa versa by the Race Club in the winter. Prior to this time the Masonite Factory at Eildon was closed down and most buildings had been sold and carted away. The one remaining was too large, 120 ft long by 24 ft wide, for a road transport permit to be granted by the CRB (Country Roads Board). We took an option on the building and after several months of negotiating, wrangled a permit from the CRB. We paid 1100 pounds for the building from the 1200 pounds insurance money from the burnt-down club house. We cut the building in half with a chain saw and it cost 1000 pounds to transport on two large trucks and trailers and rejoined on the present site.

Mr. Len Coker who worked at the SR & WSC, was Club Captain at the time and contributed a lot of work and planning to the new Club House. Over the years many improvements have been made, mostly by voluntary work from the different office bearers and committees. (The Club House is now very comfortable, with good locker rooms, kitchen, executive offices and spacious lounge.)

The Race Club built their own Club House and other necessary buildings close to the original shed site.

Lack of money is the main hindrance to the development of the Club. Cost of equipment and maintenance is very high. For instance the mower which cuts the greens three times a week is hydraulically powered and costs over \$9,000. The gang mower for fairways cost over \$13,000 and is towed by a tractor. Maintenance and repairs to these machines is very costly – a simple bearing or damaged cutter could mean a 2 or 3 hundred dollar repair bill and the machines require expensive monthly servicing and maintaining. Last year the annual turnover of the club was almost \$30,000. We can afford only a part-time green-keeper and a large portion of the upkeep of the course and equipment has to be done by voluntary labour by the members.

The problem is the size of the town, population 2000. Our membership is about 120, including Lady Associates, country members and juniors. Towns like Benalla, Wangaratta and Albury with memberships many times ours have the money to spend on their courses. Also there are three other golf courses very close to ours (Marysville, Eildon and Taggerty).

Originally we were in the North East Division with Albury, Yarrawonga, Wangaratta, Benalla, Mansfield, Euroa and others in that area but over the years, the group became too strong, so they added a new district called Dalhousie. We are now in that group and the area covers from Eildon and Marysville as far south as Pyalong, Lancefield and Gisborne and includes Euroa, Yea, Seymour, Nagamie and Kilmore.

No, unfortunately we are at the top, or north end of the District and with the long travel distances involved and the main season being in winter, we don't receive many visits from southern clubs in the Dalhousie District.

We've had some very good players over the years. Mr. Lance Thompson was Victorian country Champion once, a very prestigious title. We've had quite a few single figure players, the three Murray brothers, Alec, Keith and Ferg, were all on low marks. Peter Hale has been Club Champion and on moving to Melbourne played for several years in top pennant competition. We've has several youngsters who learned their golf at Alexandra but when they became really proficient, moved on in their careers to cities. This happens in Country Clubs.

About 16 holes in one have been achieved over the years. The course par is about standard at 72 and the accredited course rating for handicapping is 68 in summer and 69 in winter. This is adjusted according to playing conditions.

Competition golf is played on Wednesday and Sunday in summer and Saturdays in winter. The club enters two teams in Dalhousie Pennant Competitions, played on Sundays during the winter. We've had some success over the years but the competition is quite strong, against towns with much larger populations and club memberships than ours. During the year, two annual Tournaments are held, plus other special days such as Legacy. Mixed golf days are held with the Associates on some Sundays. Generally the club is considered very active in the competition area.

The club certainly has some influence on the town. Tourists play regularly all the year round and business must benefit from their visits and purchases by members and others of materials and equipment associated with the golf club and its maintenance.

The membership has not changed much over the years, as the town's population is very stable. Playing conditions have improved vastly over recent years with the course being open all year. This year we have gained several members from adjacent towns for this reason. If green fee players can be encouraged in sufficient numbers their contributions can be of great help to the club. Over recent years green fee players have increased considerably at Alexandra, but I think we could do a lot more to encourage Melbourne and suburban social golf clubs to visit us in numbers. A game of golf in the city area entails a lengthy wait, sometimes several hours, on the first tee, and this time could be spent traveling to a course with no waiting time and a nice leisurely round. Green fees are \$3 per person per round, which is very reasonable.

I don't see much advancement in the future, although the club is considered a strong club and very active and certainly won't go backwards. As I said previously, the club is limited by finances and town population. All we can do is to keep trying to improve playing conditions so that more people want to come and enjoy playing our course and join the club.