



PHOTOS BY DAVID ESSLER DESIGNS

# The oldest new course

Ravisloe, a grand name in Chicago golf for more than a century, has opened its doors as a public facility

By Neal Kotlarek

**A** little more than a century ago, the village of Homewood was a rapidly changing place.

Electric and telephone service had just been installed and a volunteer fire department had been assembled. The community 25 miles south of Chicago was quite literally bursting at the seams. As many as 10 trains made daily round trips here from the city, and many of them carried golfers looking to test their skills on one of the area's recently opened clubs.

Flash forward to 2009 and pretty much everything about Homewood has changed in one form or another.

The Thornton Flour Mill, which opened for business in



Claude Gendreau

1856, is long gone. Rail service still exists, but mostly as an optional form of mass transportation. And the population, well under 3,000 back in the early 1900s, has jumped over six fold.

Perhaps the one constant through all these years is the community's love affair with golf. The extensive list of grand old private clubs in the area included Calumet,

Flossmoor (once called Homewood), Idlewild, Olympia Fields and Ravisloe.

On April 1, the 108-year-old Ravisloe Country Club transitioned from this list and became a public facility. In an amazingly quick turnaround, veterinary surgeon Claude Gendreau purchased the property in early 2009 and quickly put together a team to fine-tune and manage it in time for the '09 season.

The centerpiece of the 160-acre club is a par-70 course originally designed by Theodore Moreau and James Foulis (winner of the second U.S. Open Championship in 1896) and later redesigned by Donald Ross between 1917 and 1919. In 2002, architect David Esler performed a \$1 million renovation project on Ravisloe specifically to restore sand bunkers that captured Ross's vision.

The sale of Ravisloe from a renowned private club to a public facility was emotionally and economically charged. Last fall, a large portion of the membership left to join neighboring clubs due to mounting debt. The exodus placed an additional financial burden on the remaining 47 Ravisloe members, and in the end, the best option for survival was to sell the club for \$3.5 million to Dr. Gendreau.

David Matasar was a vice-president on the club's board of directors that made the painful decision to sell.

"It was a sad day for my family and the community," he acknowledged. "But what makes me happy is to see Ravisloe carrying on as a golf course. Claude Gendreau is investing in the course and in the clubhouse to create an outstanding public facility. We chose wisely."

Matasar's family joined Ravisloe in 1959. "I was 6 years old and scared to walk into the clubhouse," he recalls. "It was a special place and all of the members treated it as such. Ravisloe was not just a golf club; it was a social gathering spot where members socialized, ate dinners together, and stayed for entertainment."

Through the decades, Matasar served in many capacities at the club, first as a committee chairman and eventually as a vice-president. In 2002, the group approved and oversaw a \$1 million renovation project to bring the course up to date with advancing technology and restore it to the original vision of Ross. According to Matasar, the project was a tremendous success.

"The changes have added a lot to the course's playability and competitiveness," he said. "Sand bunkers tightened the landing areas and protected the greens."

It was hoped the renovations would cultivate a renewed interest in the club, thus resulting in new membership.

But when that did not materialize, the continued success of the club was in serious jeopardy.

The board met regularly to discuss different ways to attract new members while reducing costs. Eventually, the group got around to discussing dropping the club's storied caddie program, which produced at least 90 Evans Scholars over the years.

"The idea was immediately shot down," said Matasar. "Caddies were an integral part of the Ravisloe experience. They were an extended part of our family. When I became a full member (in 1976), we had only five or six golf cars on the property as most everyone wanted to walk the course with the caddies."

In the end, the sour economy dictated that the board take drastic actions in order to stave off closure.

"Most if not all clubs have been struggling with memberships," Matasar says. "Golf is changing along with the rest of the world. Looking at the



The seventh hole at Ravisloe Country Club



The 13th hole at Ravisloe Country Club

how much they enjoyed themselves.”

On a Friday morning in late May, Marks was about to give a course overview to an elderly gentleman and was abruptly cut off in mid-sentence. “The man had been a caddie here in 1940 and was involved in operations in 1950,” Marks says. “He rattled off yardages on each hole from various trees and landmarks around the property. The guy knew his stuff.”

Operations for Ravisloe are now overseen by GolfVisions Management Inc., an Elmhurst-based course management company that performs similar services at various public facilities in and around Chicago. Tim Miles, Sr., owner of the firm, states his company has a singular mission.

2009-2010 fiscal year, it was evident that we had a viability issue. We didn’t have a lot of time to locate a buyer and a large portion of our membership wanted to stay together at another club. We had five or six potential buyers of Ravisloe. What we liked about Dr. Gendreau was that he was environmentally sensitive. He told us of his vision to preserve the course and open it to the public. I’m glad to say that Ravisloe continues on.”

The new owner recalls the first time he visited the club. “As soon as I saw the property, I fell in love with it,” Gendreau says. “It looks like a European garden. I want to keep Ravisloe as a golf course because it is a jewel that I think should be accessible to the public.”

The Buffalo Grove businessman built one of the nation’s first veterinary surgical centers in 1976 and now employs approximately 200. He expects to put 30-35 employees to work at Ravisloe. “I feel good about that,” Gendreau says.

Since its opening, the club has played host to a steady stream of golfers.

According to general manager Tim Marks, the initial reception has been fantastic. “Players are coming here from around the city,” he says. “A few have told me that they’ve been driving by Ravisloe all of their lives and they’ve been dying to play the course. They finish their rounds and tell us

“We want our guests to be treated as if they were country club members,” he says. “Ravisloe may have changed ownership, but it remains the same great golf course with an amazing clubhouse and a tremendous, lasting legacy.” 🌳

Neal Kotlarek is a freelance writer from Chicago.

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— Claude Gendreau

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