

Roaring Gap Club recaptures Ross identity

By **DUNLOP WHITE III**

Unless you find some good directions or follow someone up U.S. Highway 21 toward Sparta, you probably won't stumble across Roaring Gap Club. Tucked away in a cozy little spot of the Blue Ridge Mountains — perched 3,000 feet above sea level — the club offers mind-boggling vistas of Pilot Mountain and the Winston-Salem skyline in the horizon. For golfers, of course, the main attraction is a challenging Donald Ross design that is celebrating its 80th birthday.

According to Michael Fay, executive director of the Donald Ross Society, the golf course is probably the best-kept secret in North Carolina. Certainly, it's not one you would expect to be mentioned alongside hidden gems like Fishers Island (NY), The Creek Club (NY), Yeamans Hall (SC) or Bald Peak Colony (NH). But that's exactly where Fay insists it belongs.

"Roaring Gap would be one of the first chapters of any book on the special hideaways in golf," said Fay, who has played more Ross courses than anyone of record, including 221 of the 375 that exist today.

A Pinehurst Pedigree

The club dates back to 1925, when Leonard Tufts, president of Pinehurst Inc., and a group of affluent North Carolina businessmen, proposed the development of a private mountain community to reside during the summer months. Pinehurst had already become a popular winter enclave in the Sandhills, and Tufts envisioned a companion golf retreat with the perfect climate for his Yankee clientele, who were tiring of their long trip back north every summer.

In 1926, Roaring Gap Club was formed, and Tufts served as the first president. In fact, brochures and press releases referred to Roaring Gap as "the Pinehurst of the Mountains."

Because Roaring Gap started as a joint venture with Pinehurst Inc., Tufts made sure that Donald Ross, his golf director in Pinehurst, was the hands-on architect from start to finish. After all, Ross already had made quite a name for himself outside Pinehurst by designing courses during the summers throughout the northeast. Until 1938, even Ross' assistants at Pinehurst, including Palmer Maples, interned as head professionals at Roaring Gap every summer.

When recounting Roaring Gap's golf legacy, few clubs can claim such a distinguished start. Realizing this, the private club has recently shown a greater sense of appreciation for their golf course and its architectural integrity. Naturally — the club figured — a layout so intimately



Roaring Gap's Graystone Inn serves as a backdrop to the fourth green.

tied to Ross and Pinehurst should be taken seriously three generations later.

It all stems from the belief that works-of-art deserve close care and meticulous preservation. "It's really no different from protecting historic antebellum porches from weathering or being glassed-in and updated," said Walker Taylor, who spearheaded the restoration of Wilmington Municipal and Cape Fear Country Club in his hometown of Wilmington.

"Besides, club folks too often underestimate the value of tradition and heritage," said Taylor. "Certainly, a Ross design is an attraction, but its authenticity makes it one of the most powerful marketing tools available for clubs today."

Ross eventually left behind an impressive legacy of 413 courses, where more than 100 USGA national championships have been played. Today, 25 Ross thoroughbreds are ranked in *Golfweek's* "America's Best 100 Courses," many of which gained their fanfare following a sensitive restoration.

Small wonder club officials across the country are making the journey to the Tuft's Archives, the Donald Ross repository at the Given Memorial Library in Pinehurst, to uncover rare archival evidence that reveals exactly how Mr. Ross intended for their course to look and play.

Reviving Ross

For Roaring Gap, retrieving Ross' original routing plan was the coup d'état. It provided the sizes, shapes and positions of original design features and allowed the club to make "then versus now" comparisons that revealed exactly

how these items have changed and deteriorated over the decades.

As living landscapes, golf courses naturally evolve — trees grow and fairways contract. It's difficult to notice in any one season, but over the course of 80 years, Roaring Gap's fairways have lost nearly half of their original widths, resulting in razor-thin corridors flanked by lush walls of vegetation.

Architect, Kris Spence, a restoration specialist from Greensboro, recommended a judicious tree management program with the emphasis on peeling back the overgrowth.

Roaring Gap's greens also lost nearly half of their original putting surfaces. The advent of riding triplex mowers had gradually rounded-off all of Ross' intricately shaped green corners reducing them to little more than basic ovals. Matters were made worse by decades of topdressing applications that have gradually elevated their surfaces more than 13 inches above grade.

Bunkers too fall prey to wind and erosion. Add the wear and tear of golf traffic and maintenance, and it's no surprise that Roaring Gap's bunkers appeared ragged and dilapidated. In turn, Spence re-established the sand/grass lines to their proper depths and dimensions by scraping away the sand build-up and spray that accumulated over time.

At 6,100 yards, the course was undersized by anyone's standards. Nowadays, golf balls are traveling greater distances than Ross ever envisioned. Therefore, Spence lengthened 10 holes

— where room was available — to bring their intended landing areas back into play from the tee.

In addition, Spence squared-off the new tee boxes and planted fine fescue grasses in the peripheral areas, that seed out and turn wispy-brown, to promote the classical look and feel of an early-American landscape.

Ross also had a penchant for cross-bunkers — patterned in diagonal alignments — to direct golfers in conjunction with the prevailing movement of the terrain. Sometimes cross-bunkers guided golfers down a slope or over a ridge to a landing area not readily discernible from the tee, as was the case on Nos. 5 and 14. But Ross never intended for cross-bunkers to be unduly penal. He simply used them to provide golfers with a visual determination of the land required for thoughtful shot-making.

Through the years, especially during the Depression, heavy-handed green committees abandoned cross-bunkers in a wholesale effort to alleviate labor costs. In recent years, however, a dedicated group of restoration specialists, including Spence, have faithfully devoted their talents to recapturing Ross' design features, none of which are more distinctive than his cross-bunkers.

To date, not every cross-bunker has been reinstated. But should a debate ever arise over Ross' intentions, members need only to consult the wall of the golf grill, where a full-blown copy of the architect's 1925 rendering hangs.

"We never run short of opinions up here," says Bill Glenn, in jest. "But once the club made the commitment to Ross, most everyone defers to his drawings," says Roaring Gap's long-time golf professional.

Glenn even replicated an antique scorecard from the late-1940s to stay in keeping with a traditional golf course aesthetic.

Superintendent Len Fawcett integrated some old-fashioned accessories to enhance the on-course presentation. Molded plastics and other glossy commercial items have slowly been replaced with vintage, handcrafted reproductions, such as wooden flagsticks and cast iron cups, which evoke a time-honored sensibility to the golfing grounds.

Even today, Fawcett works tirelessly to coordinate modern maintenance practices with old-school design standards, an ongoing exercise that continues long after the spadework.

It's all part of a long range master plan to recover Ross' distinct design character of yesteryear.