



# A renovation done right

Oregon's Gearhart Golf Links breathes new life as a community darling

By Thomas Dunne GEARHART, ORE.



“

For a place where it rains so much, everything sure seems to burn down a lot,” Jason Bangild muses, perhaps not for the first time.

Bangild is leading us on a tour of the clubhouse at Oregon's Gearhart Golf Links, where he serves as general manager and director of golf. We've paused in front of an antique photo taken in front of the clubhouse, capturing men in stiff suits, women in fancy Victorian hats and Model T-era cars in the background.

The structure in the photo was lost to fire in either 1913 or '15, and the precise date isn't essential here,

since major conflagrations occurred in both years. The old hotel that served the course burned down in the 1970s, and yet another iteration of the clubhouse and its famed Sand Trap bar were consumed by flame in 1998.

Given this recitation of infernal events, one might think Gearhart Golf Links, which lies smack in the middle of a village of some 1,600 on the Pacific coast about 90 minutes northwest of Portland, has some kind of star-crossed history. But it's actually a charmed place where earlier generations engaged in free-spirited tournaments in costume (pirates, Spanish bullfighters, etc.), and has in recent years gathered so much positive momentum it warrants a mention in the conversation »





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**ABOVE:** Hundreds of trees were removed at Gearhart to improve play and open views of the coastal range, and fescue was established in marginal areas.

about the best ways forward for American community golf.

Golf roots run deep in Gearhart. Originating in 1892 with three homemade holes in the dunes, it bills itself as the oldest golf course west of the Mississippi. The bones of today's routing are said to be the early 1930s work of Chandler Egan, best known for his famed renovation of Pebble Beach but who also played a major role in the creation of a number of Oregon's finest clubs, including Eugene

Country Club and Waverley Country Club in Portland.

Like many courses of its era, Gearhart's evolution in the mid-twentieth century did not lead to better golf. Pine trees were planted and multiplied, mowing lines deteriorated and a renovation in the 1990s introduced some awkward shaping. Though the town itself had always been popular among affluent weekend homeowners, says John Strawn, a longtime Rose City resident and former CEO of Robert Trent Jones II's design firm, "No one from Portland would drive out here to play. It was just another boring, treelined course."

In the early 2010s, though, Gearhart turned a page. Tim Boyle, CEO of Portland-based Columbia Sportswear, acquired

the property and initiated a host of improvements. One of his first moves was to lure Bangild, then working as the director of golf at Nanea – Charles Schwab's exclusive retreat on the Big Island of Hawaii – back to the mainland with the promise of a 60-second commute and an appealing small town in which to raise his family.

And then there was the golf course.

"Tim had this big vision to get Gearhart back to its original design," Bangild says.

Absent plans or specific documentation from Chandler Egan, though, the course's restoration could be described more as one that was driven by spirit than literal-mindedness, like blowing dust off the canvas and fitting the work into a new frame.



In 2013 a collaborative effort began to improve the course. Strawn and the newly hired superintendent Forrest Goodling (formerly of Portland Golf Club) led the way, though many others lent a hand, including David Jacobsen (Peter's brother), who, according to Strawn, supplied the project with a fine mission statement.

"We should make Gearhart the place," Jacobsen said, "where you have your best round of the summer."

Hundreds of trees were removed, opening views of the coastal range, while fescue grasses were established in marginal areas, reducing acreage for irrigation and chemical inputs. These two actions alone went a long way toward restoring Gearhart's linky feel – though the course does not feature any ocean views, it is just a block from the beach and very much a part of its dunescape.

Another was among Goodling's first orders of business: to punch through the many layers of thatch accumulated beneath the fairways. Once that task was complete, firm conditions prevailed.

"We're built on 100 feet of sand, so now we're dry," Goodling says, "and we didn't have to import any material for the project."

By digging a substantial borrow pit between the ninth and 12th holes, the



team excavated enough sand to construct new tees on 11 holes. Strawn noted that the previous tees often were set on the wrong orientation; the new ones open up plenty of interesting diagonals.

The sand also was used to build a series of berms to hide the parking lot, comfort station and maintenance area, as well as to create the "Clam Bed," a 20,000 square foot, Himalayas-style putting green that comes with its own refreshment stand.

Another factor in Gearhart's renewal that shouldn't pass without mention: Boyle's decision to partner with brothers Brian and Mike McMenamin on the facility's food and beverage service. As the operators of more than 60 hotels, brewpubs and restaurants throughout the Pacific Northwest, McMenamin's is a popular "anti-chain," individualizing each of its properties by drawing on quirky local history and a flair for amusing and artsy interiors.

Toward the end of our round, John Strawn tells me that during the restoration he drew inspiration from the community-oriented, shoestring-budget architecture that Eddie Hackett produced in Ireland a half-century ago. It's a good comparison – Gearhart feels similarly old school, packed into a tight, 100-acre, mostly rectangular site that seldom feels cramped.

Its greens are small, but the surrounds often offer backstops or sideboards to help golfers keep their approaches close. Though it's just a bit over 6,500 yards from the tips, the heavy sea air often makes it play longer. Some holes, such as the 18th, a par 5 that fish-hooks left toward an elevated and false-fronted green that ejects indifferent approaches some 30 yards downslope, are bears in any weather condition.

As we made our way around Gearhart's low dunescape, a carefree feeling prevailed. There's a particular satisfaction that comes from experiencing a course that's both affordable (peak green fee: \$85) and honest in its mission.

The golf world often marvels at big-budget, down-to-the-studs renovations, but Gearhart's renewal demonstrates that sometimes a lot of little things can add up to something pretty neat in its own right. **Gwk**

