

## SUMMER 2024 My Lists

By Doug Breen, Superintendent,  
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Today I played a course in Perth, Ontario - which claims to be "Canada's Oldest Golf Course". It must be true, because there's a sign at the road and everything! I've been known to make up the odd fact here or there in the name of marketing, but once the sign people are involved - well those people have some ethics and standards! The Signmakers' Guild would never stand for exaggeration or prevarication. According to the Golf Canada website, and confirmed by a random guy in the Perth GC Proshop, the front nine was laid out in 1890.

Random Proshop guy also told me that three of the existing holes are original, and were laid out by a British Officer / Gentleman Farmer some 134 years ago ... although he 'wasn't sure which ones'.

I am aware that there are a handful of other Canadian golf clubs which predate 1890, but either they no longer exist, or aren't in their original locations. There is one other Ontario course (Niagara on the Lake) which claims to be the "Oldest Golf Club in North America" (take that, Perth Golf Club). It's a widely known fact, that John Geale Dickson had the course ready for play by the 1875 season. It's also true, that a local newspaper reported on a match played there in 1878, where a "pony cart followed them from hole to hole, laden with every possible beverage which the human tongue could desire". They also have a sign at the road! So which sign is correct?

Niagara on the Lake GC is built on a War of 1812 battle site. At one time, the second hole was a blind par three over the tower and earthworks of Fort Mississauga. The land is controlled by the Canadian Government - and explains why there was considerable pressure to stop whacking balls over, into, and off of a historic fort, battlements, and graveyard. In fact, in the early 1970's there was a movement to close the course entirely.



**"We're very proud of our 100 years of history and the integrity of the original design. As a result, we've only changed the bunkers, tees, greens, fairways, and clubhouse ... and the routing ... and the location."**

But this is how Perth GC gets to keep their sign - during WW1, like many Canadian golf courses, Niagara on the Lake was expropriated as a training base for soldiers. Perth is the oldest golf course in Canada in continuous operation, while Niagara on the Lake is the oldest North American golf course in its original location.

So why did I tell you that story? Because the history of Canadian golf is fascinating, and unlike the history found in a museum, you can still go and play these places. You can literally book a tee time and walk on the history of North American golf design. You can putt on a green where people have been putting since 1875, and chip out of a moat where soldiers took shelter during the war of 1812. Kingswell Glen in Petrolia (1895) was laid out among the drilling rigs where the oil industry was born. I played a course in Virginia that was criss-crossed with trenches from the Civil War.

I have many spreadsheets on my laptop (most of them very dull and drenched with anxiety and responsibility), but my favourite spreadsheet is one called "Doug's Golf Tour". There are multiple tabs on that spreadsheet. I keep track of every course that I play each year. At a minimum, I play every hole, on every course under the GolfNorth umbrella (got to play them to know what we're

presenting). The next tab, is my lifetime list - there were some hazy games in my twenties, so I know that this list isn't very accurate, but I should get to 300 unique courses by the end of this year.

The last two tabs are my favourites. I am on a quest to play as many Stanley Thompson designed courses that I can before I die (I'm sitting at 33). I'm also trying to play any course that is over 100 years old (I'm at 21 of those). Now that my kids are grown up, and I don't spend all my free time in hockey arenas and beside football/rugby/ horse fields - I needed a project. I'm becoming

obsessed with the history of Canadian golf, and golf design.

When you play one of these unique properties, you can see the development of golf architecture; beginning with natural contours, evolving into hand built Victorian style landscapes, and ultimately into the natural look and the age of the machine. You can see how designers like Stanley Thompson borrowed from the camouflaged earthworks of WW1 France. The master, Alister MacKenzie said that he learned about "natural design" from the disguised trenches of the Boer war. It's all out there to be seen.

Many of the least altered locations are relatively inexpensive to play, and a joy to find - that's a shout out to you, Allendale! Architect Ian Andrew called it the most original Stanley Thompson course in Ontario. Many well-intentioned greens committees have done some truly horrid things to some really good golf courses.

If you haven't done it, I urge you to go out and visit some of these classics. You'll play some very fun holes, see some very interesting ideas, and if you listen closely, you might even hear some ghosts. There will definitely be a random old guy in the Proshop who can't wait to tell you some stories. ■