Lawn bowling: Genteel pastime or cutthroat competition?

VINTAGE VIEWS

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Bowling outdoors has a history that dates back to 3200 B.C. Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs clearly illustrate the game and versions of it appear in many cultures around the world right up through the Middle Ages. Lawn bowling became especially popular in Scotland, where the modern-day rules were mostly standardized, and England in the early 1800s, enjoyed by both the middle class and royalty. As the British Commonwealth expanded, so too did its leisure-time activities.

Why did such a British-oriented game become popular in what was mostly a German-settled community like Tavistock? Perhaps it was the local Scottish influence combined with it being a leisurely warm-weather pursuit that could be enjoyed by both youth and retired people of both genders with minimal equipment, training and expense.

The first proposal for a bowling green in the community appears to have been shortly before 1902 for where the Oxford Hotel was built, now the public library/Oxford Manor. Then a larger area became available just south of the railway tracks behind a variety of businesses on Hope Street West near the centre of town. This became the green's location. The club grew quickly and by 1919, there were 42 members. That same year, a tournament was held in Tavistock with prizes of four fountain pens, four shaving kits and four ivory mantel clocks. The interwar years seem to have been the club's heyday.

Decades later in the 1960s, my childhood chums and I bowled here. We learned the basics of the game along with the terminology. It's not a ball that you throw; it's a bowl. The bowl is not round like a ball; rather it's slightly flattened on opposite sides, which creates the ability to make the bowl curve when thrown. We didn't throw our bowls in alleys as in pin bowling; rather we played on about six rinks, which made up the entire green. At the far end of the rinks was a ditch to catch the occasional bowl. The target on the far end of the rink was a small white ball widely known as the "jack," though in Tavistock we used a variation of this word.

You can see one in the photo on top of the bowls in front of the group, atypically positioned like this for the picture.

Learning to arc the bowl was important to use against opponents because you could manoeuvre your bowls around those they had positioned to block yours. The point of the game is to get your bowls as close to, but not touching, the white ball and to block your opponents' bowls at the same time. Strategies were discussed in hushed tones by adult team members. When the opposing team managed to arc their bowl around yours or knock it out of its "guard" position
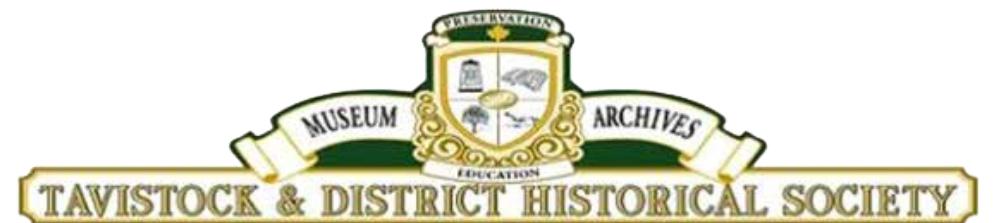
(JOHN LEMP; SCAN NUMBER 0419)

Lawn bowling was popular in Tavistock for almost 60 years. Around 1920, this group of players posed for a photo. Only four are positively identified: Dr. W.O. Kaufmann is the sixth man from the left in the back row, C.J. Kaufman is in the front row on the far left, Harry Zimmerman is kneeling on the left and John 'Jack' Lemp is on the far right standing.

and stop a finger width from the target, I learned a word or two from the losing team that I was never taught in Sunday School.

Behind the group on the left is the station master's home, today a private residence. Other homes on Station Street are visible too. Zimmerman's box factory smokestack is on the right. The men are facing towards a small white clubhouse that was erected with deep overhanging eaves akin to the railway station nearby, but what was most impressive was the green. It was almost as level and smooth as a billiard table, very short-cropped, carefully watered and tended to by local people hired to care for it. The dense, very even grass was the envy of every home or golf club owner.

Despite this being an outdoor summer activity, no one in the photo is wearing short pants or short-sleeved shirts, which became popular post-WWII and in the late 1920s respectively. Men's belts were starting to become common, replacing suspenders, as waist lines were comically high by today's standards. No one appears to be smoking. Some of the men are wearing a vest, as well as the soon unfashionable paper collar, and most are sporting long neckties.

There's another photo of lawn bowlers in the Lemp Studio Collection (0420) with four women, all wearing dresses and two men wearing bow ties. These modes of dress give lawn bowling a genteel air, incongruous with competitions that could become cut-throat.

Carl Seltzer's 1967 Fact & Fantasy book on local history has extensive information about the club from 1902-1968. He listed all the executive members, annual fees and when women were admitted in 1919 paying $2 per year. The membership fee for "old members" was $5 and $3 for beginners the same year. By 1952, beginners membership rose to $5. Total membership was 42 in 1919 when the club had expenses totalling $354.73 and income was $356.98. Electric lights were installed in 1916; three hanging bulbs are visible in the photo on the left. In 1919, rent was $20 per year for the green that measured about 120-by-120 feet (36.6-by-36.6 metres).

Ruby Quehl was a renowned local bowler and accolades came in 1954 when Don Purdy and Harry Zimmerman were provincial champions in men's doubles, and again in 1967 when Howard Wilson and Bill Ducklow won the American doubles prize. In the late '60s, the landowner sold the property and the club folded. The former bowling green is now a parking lot.

Lawn bowling; a game of yesteryear and language lessons for young boys in Tavistock.

Last week's History Mystery: The photo was of Zimmerman's box factory with about 50 employees and horses taken in 1918. The question was: "Apart from some of the workers standing with their arms crossed perhaps for warmth and all wearing long sleeves, what's another hint that this photo was taken on a cool day, despite it being sunny?" The first reader to answer this correctly was Connie Hitzeroth of Tavistock. The answer is that the woman on the right is wearing gloves and the other is wearing a fur hand muff.

This week's History Mystery: What do young lions, tigers, house cats and lawn bowling in Tavistock all have in common? This question is open to all. The first person to email the correct answer to me at tim_mosher@hotmail.com will have their name and community or rural route number published in next week's Vintage Views. The deadline to forward your answer is 9 a.m. next Tuesday.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR: Creating havoc in Wilmot for a data centre?

Dear Editor,

Koodos for Anne Loeffler's letter of Aug. 14.

I would like to summarize the issue of building a data centre within the 770 acres as follows:

1. On the plus side, a few U of W computer science grads might score a number of high-tech jobs. However, high salaries and benefits will not be guaranteed. No doubt, the owner of the data centre will earn fistfuls of money, should it all go well.

2. On the negative side, why all the secrecy, disrespect for regional planning processes and disregard for due diligence? Secrecy, in this case, strongly suggests that had the proponents of the land grab been honest and transparent, the acquisition of the 770 acres would have never gotten off the ground. Currently, the 770 acres provide an income for the farmers and an idyllic respite for the many retired people and younger families from the hustle and bustle of the city. The construction and operation of the data centre will put these people back into an industrial environment.

There will be a dramatic increase in electrical-power consumption, leading to the expansion of electrical-generation facilities, no to mention the need to supply water to the data centre for cooling. Naturally, the region will agree to fund these projects, leading to higher tax rates for the residents, all so that a few computer science grads can wear a lab coat to work.Taking a moral perspective, is there any proof that a data centre, powering AI, will provide any lasting benefit to the general population of Ontario? Is it not possible that the overall effect of AI will simply be to eliminate all sorts of jobs with no tangible benefits to the people? Are there not already good examples of prosperous internet-related businesses with zero ethical standards?

3. Should we be really destroying farmland for a data centre? We already have our share of shady businesses to contend with.

Regards,

Paul Sedran,

New Hamburg