



DIVINE PROVIDENCE ON THE WEST COAST

By Robert Birman



There's an uncommon energy in the air in the Pacific Northwest. It may have to do with the prevailing Westerlies. The air is crisp, clean, and often charged with a vigor akin to a cool fall morning in the East.



New Year's Day 2014, Chambers Bay, Washington
Top: The original Country Club of Seattle (1896)

On New Year's Day 2014 at Chambers Bay, such were the conditions at the dawn of Northwest Hickory Players—what became the fastest-growing regional hickory golf group in the United States in the last decade.

Unbeknownst to those gathered that day, an astronomically special assembly of hickory golf enthusiasts were just waiting to be beckoned forth, like the 17-year cycle of cicadas mystically emerging, fully mature.

The seven players gathered that day (from left to right in photo: Martin Pool, Roberta Robbins, Robert Birman, Tom Driscoll, Andrew Von Lossow, Tyler Ames, and Jim Von Lossow) stopped to sup with fellow founders Rob Ahlschwede and Jack Wilson in the fading light of

the Northwest winter and made a simple pact. The group—whatever it was to be called—shall always be all-volunteer. There will be no dues, no preconditions for joining. This would be a home for hickory golfers of all stripes, young or old, experienced or not, in the Northwest, aimed at expanding awareness and interest in the sport.

What all of us later grew to appreciate, however, is that providence seemingly dealt us a Royal Flush. It wasn't preconceived, rather divine providence. How many U.S. regional play groups have members with an embroidered golf bag declaring, "Hickory Shaft Open Champion 1987?" We do (John Henry Williams at Crooked River Ranch). Considering that the SoHG wasn't founded until 2000, this is quite unusual.

A critical mass of longstanding Golf Collectors Society (now Golf Heritage Society) colleagues were loosely organized in the area. A gaggle of activist Society of Hickory Golfers (SoHG) members were here, including the equipment guru (Rob “Kilty” Ahlschwede), hickory-hobbyist PGA professionals abound, golf club fitters, avid collectors, world-class club restorers, golf historians, USGA course raters, the leading American golf book dealer, high school and college golf coaches, and more—we were all here, just not yet affiliated.

Dubbing ourselves Northwest Hickory Players, we settled on service to Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and British Columbia. Why think small? With a critical mass in Seattle, the group was launched and a calendar of events was born. PGA pro Jim Von Lossow was designated as captain, and he and his son Andrew (with assistance from Robert Birman and Martin Pool) built our first logo and website, which includes course listings of every course in the three-state area from 1935 and earlier, as well as course histories for many of these.

As the ranks grew, NWHP formally established its “Affiliates” program in 2021, designating four leaders—two in Idaho (Tom and Sue Tracy) and two in Oregon (Brad Harvey and Brandon Bunke) to help expand events outside of the central hub.

One of the great revelations for some of us is the utter wealth of mostly-untouched 19th and early 20th century courses that exist here in the Puget Sound. Golf course development in the United States wasn’t exclusive to the Northeast—the development was virtually simultaneously happening here and in the Midwest as well. We list each state’s courses chronologically on our website. They include Gearhart Golf Links (1892), Tacoma Country and Golf Club (1894), the original Country Club of Seattle (1896), The



Seattle Golf Club (1896), Waverly Country Club (1896), and Spokane County Club (1898). We have unrestored sand green courses here in Washington and Oregon that we frequent. And—of course—we have world-class modern links layouts including Bandon Dunes, Gamble Sands, Chambers Bay and others. The riches (and the coastal conditions in many parts) connects us to this game’s glorious past.

Today, our group regularly welcomes 40 players to many events and we host 4-5 two-to-three-day events annually. Our “major” events include the Gearhart Hickory Classic in Oregon, generously supported by owner Tim Boyle and head professional Jason Bangild, a moveable multi-day Pacific Northwest Hickory Championship, Washington State Hickory Championship, Oregon Hickory Championship, Pacific Northwest Gutter Championship, and our annual Ryder Cup-style C.O.W. Cup, which is jointly coordinated with the NorCal Hickory Golf association (C.O.W. refers to California vs. Oregon and Washington), this year held at Lake Shastina Golf Resort in Weed, Calif.

Northwest Hickory Players served as host to the first-ever U.S. Hickory Open on the West Coast, at Pebble Beach Resorts (Del Monte Golf Course) in 2017 and again as coordinating host for the 2021 U.S. Hickory Open at Gearhart Golf Links on the Oregon Coast. Four of its members are, or have been, board members of the SoHG, and in 2021, NWHP claimed the largest number of registered members of any regional association in the SoHG.

In terms of formats, we play chapman, match play, fourball, tombstone, sty-mie, wolf, bingo-bango-bongo, and cha-cha-cha tournaments, and we’re proud of our strong contingent of ladies’ members which includes the 2022



Previous Page: Andrew Von Lossow drives up the 17th at Gearhart *en route* to his victory at the 2021 USHO.
 Above: NWHP's lady members, Liz Keeler, Roberta Robbins, Donna Richmond, and Pam Rowland come to compete. Photos: Don Frank

World Hickory Open champion, Sue Tracy. The club also boasts the 2021 U.S. Hickory Open champion, Andrew Von Lossow. In September this year, the group launched a new *Gloria Minoprio Challenge* in Port Townsend, Wash.—a one club, nine-hole tournament in honor of the legendary and glamorous competitor who played in the 1933 British Women's Amateur wearing trousers and playing with just one cleek.

Our players are intrepid. Tom Tracy was the 2016 USHO Senior Champion (he also won his club championship playing with hickories), Jim Von Lossow the 2017 USHO Senior Champion, Roberta Robbins the 2017 USHO Women's Champion, Chelsea Guenette the 2021 USHO Women's Champion, and Mark Keating the 2021 USHO Super Senior Champion, not to mention the 2018 World Hickory Open during which Jim Von Lossow, John Henry Williams, and Andrew Von Lossow finished 1-2-3!

Pioneers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark famously wintered on the Oregon coast in 1805 and ascribed divine providence for keeping them safe, along with their Corps of Discovery, throughout their epic 1,228-day trek which included a 51-day, 350-mile portage between navigable waters of the Missouri and the Columbia River that separates Washington and Oregon.

In their honor, and that of Columbia Sportswear co-owner, Tim Boyle (who owns Gearhart Golf Links), in 2024 the aforementioned Gearhart Hickory Classic is being elevated, replete with a new trophy and expanded relationship with the course, to *The Columbia Cup*. The 2024 event will be held July 13-14, 2024. NWHP is grateful for the many national and international players who have frequented our events, including from Canada, Florida, Texas, North Carolina, South Carolina, Michigan, Alabama, Arizona, California, Wisconsin, Vermont, Illinois, and be-

yond. Our players reciprocate whenever possible. We give special recognition to Tad Moore who has been a regular guest at NWHP events.

Player/members handle our website design, research, event coordination, registration, sponsorships, scoreboards, photography, social media management, graphic design, apparel, banking, an annual raffle, and the first-ever exclusive podcast for hickory golf (*The Plus Four®* podcast). Co-founder, Robert Birman, was also featured on *The Golf Channel* during the pandemic to talk with Shane Bacon and Damon Hack about the virtues of hickory golf. The most remarkable element, to us, is the confluence of talent here with seemingly no overlap. Each enthusiast has their place, and the organizers get along, feel fulfilled, and the spirit within our monthly events pervades the membership.

It's providential.