

OUR HISTORY

By Steve Weeks



LOCATION IS THE ULTIMATE LUXURY



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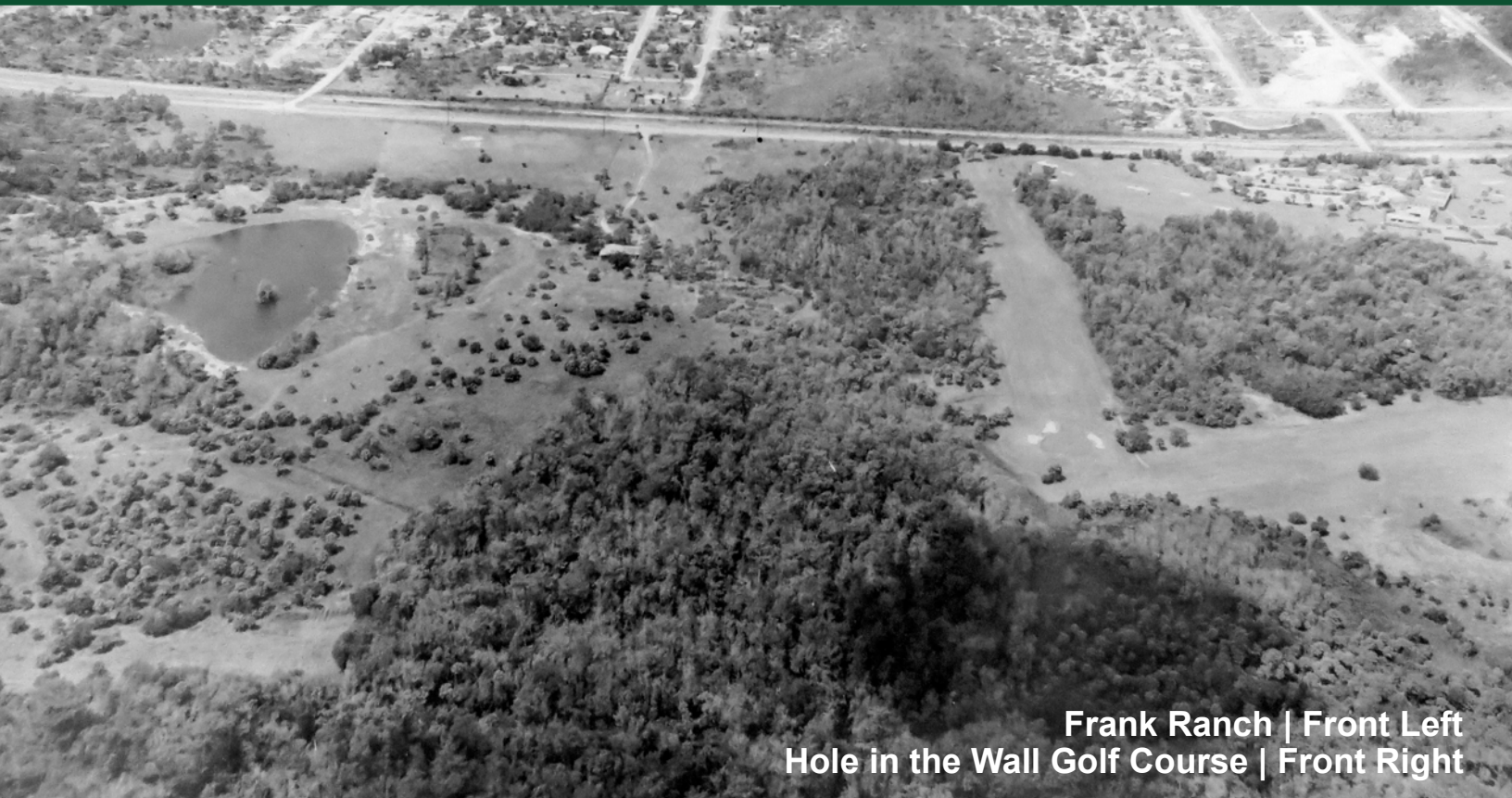
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EARLY NAPLES

The Calusa Indians were probably the first settlers on the land now occupied by the Wilderness Country Club (WCC), as they inhabited many parts of southwest Florida for over 2,000 years before the arrival of white settlers. For the sake of this condensed version of WCC's history let's begin in 1912, when a gentleman named E. W. Crayton, an Ohio real estate tycoon, arrived in Naples. Shortly after becoming acclimated to the surrounding area, Mr. Crayton and some trusted friends formed the Naples (Improvement) Company, essentially a real estate development enterprise. Their early investments included the original Naples Pier and a 16-room hotel just down the beach. The Naples Company was also instrumental in planning and building many of Naples earliest streets, and sea walls. In 1923, they established the first Naples golf course (9 holes) between 5th and 8th Avenues and 3rd and 8th Streets. That land later became Naples' first airport, and ultimately was converted to private homes and Cambier Park.

The most important thing that Mr. Crayton and his Naples Company did to influence the eventual creation of WCC was the formation of sub-lots of land within a new company, incorporated in 1916, called the Naples (Improvement) Company Little Farms. Ninety- seven lots of land, each representing roughly 20 acres, were sub-divided from a large swath that straddled Goodlette Frank from Pine Ridge Road on the north down to the land that now encompasses the Naples Zoo. The objective was to create mini-farms where produce, such as fruit, vegetables and dairy products could be grown, harvested and trucked into Naples to support the needs of its expanding population.



**Frank Ranch | Front Left
Hole in the Wall Golf Course | Front Right**

From the company's perspective, selling all of the lots at premium prices could have been a quick windfall, however, sales activity of the Little Farms was slowed by a severe hurricane in 1926 followed by the Great Depression of 1929, the death of E.W. Crayton in 1939 and the start of World War II shortly thereafter. It was 28 years after the inception of Little Farms when a major sale took place on November 14, 1944. Lots designated as #12 through #32 of the 97 total, amounting to 420 acres were purchased by Edward H. Frank, better known by most everyone in town as simply Ed.

THE FRANK FAMILY INFLUENCE

The Frank family played such an influential role in the history of Wilderness Country Club and Ed, the patriarch and a true pioneer of Naples, was so colorful that more details need to be shared. The Frank family migrated to America from Central Europe in the late 1800s and settled in Washington State. Ed was born in 1902 and a year later, his father moved the family south by wagon to Santa Barbara, CA. Ten years later,



Katherine & Edward Frank Circa 1925

the family traveled cross-country by train to settle in Arcadia, FL, where there was a reputation for great hunting, a favorite pastime of the senior Frank. Shortly thereafter, the family moved 23 miles further south to a small hamlet named Burmont. Feeling some pressure to help support his family, Ed, at age twelve (but claiming to be 14 to meet the legal minimum work age) became an apprentice machinist with the Charlotte Harbor and Northern Railroad where he spent four years learning about cars and machinery. When time allowed, he tinkered with old automobiles and built one from scratch from a heap of old Model T parts. His son Paul once said about his father, "Understanding machinery was a gift. Dad was a master mechanic. He could take a Model T Ford apart and put it back together blindfolded."(1)

Frank Family Garage Circa 1930



In his twenties, Ed, now married to Katherine (Katie) Espenlaub, settled in Bonita Springs where he opened his first auto mechanic garage and enjoyed the surrounding area as an avid hunter and fisherman. Automobile owners in Naples ventured north to Ed's garage and eventually convinced him to move further south where Ed and his two brothers opened Naples' first garage on 5th Avenue, near what is now Four Corners.

As a successful business man, Ed had to travel north to Ft. Myers to do his banking in those days and many of his entrepreneurial friends leaned on him to take their banking business north too. Ed eventually grew tired of the round-trip commute and asked the bank manager if he would consider opening a new bank in Naples. The banker challenged Ed to raise \$75,000 in assets which he eventually accomplished, resulting in the establishment of Naples' first bank in 1949, named the Bank of Naples. The bank was later acquired by Barnett Bank, then Nations Bank which acquired BankAmerica and modified that better- known name to become what is now a branch of Bank of America.



5th Ave. South Circa 1953

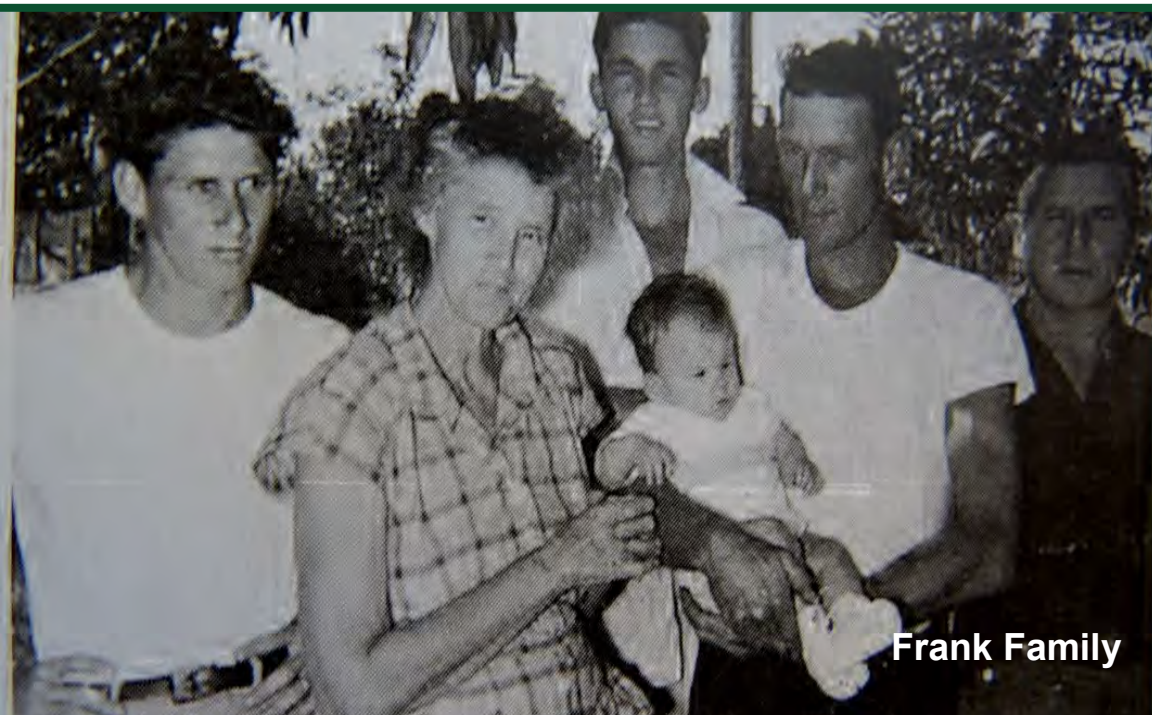
Photo Credit: State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory

5 TH AVE. SOUTH

NAPLES ,FLORIDA

2

Ed continued to invest in Naples real estate and further enhanced his reputation as a pioneer in the early 1950s by developing the first strip mall at the corner of 5th Avenue and the Tamiami Trail, which included a hardware shop, grocery store, barber shop and drug store. He and Katie then moved from their first house



Frank Family

near the auto repair business to a bigger home where the Memory Center adjacent to the 5th fairway of WCC now stands. There they raised a family of four: W.E. (Bubba), George Henry Peter, Paul and Phyllis. The children enjoyed the many benefits of growing up on their father's 420 acres of beautiful wooded land that the County Commissioner once told Ed was the finest piece of property in the area.

THE HOLE IN THE WALL

Ed Frank named his property the Hole in the Wall Ranch in reference to an opening, roughly 15 feet wide, that was carved into a thick canopy of Cypress trees in the late 1800s to allow hunters and anglers easier passage to the Gordon River and the Everglades beyond. That hole in the wall today is marked by several large stones, roughly 75 yards from the left side of WCC's 2nd tee box. There is a wonderful short story written in 1958 by Florence Haldeman Price entitled "When I Went Through The-Hole-In-The-Wall." It recounts a family hunting trip that Florence experienced with her parents in 1908 at the age of 16. The hunt was for wild turkey, the chosen prey at the turn of the century, even though Florence's father preferred to shoot quail. In early summer, they headed out from their beach-front cottage by mule and wagon for an overnight adventure. At that time, Naples was only accessible by water and one dirt road that pointed north out of town. Turning east a few miles later with two guides in tow, they found the "hole" surrounded on both sides by a solid curtain of Cypress trees as far as the eye could see. The hole was just big enough to allow their wooden wagon clear passage into a different world that Florence described as "purity and isolation" similar to "Alice Through the Looking Glass." Despite the beauty of this new and mysterious world, she wrote of being ever conscious of "wily serpents" or rattlesnakes.



**Peter Frank at the Entrance to the Hole in the Wall
Located on Wilderness Country Club's #2 Fairway**

After an evening watching and listening to her guide communicate with a half dozen owls, Florence and her parents woke up early the next morning. Her father headed out with a guide in search of quail, while Florence, her mother and the second guide lagged behind and bagged their first wild turkey without much challenge. Later that morning, Florence's father circled back and his guide presented her with an unexpected gift. It was a ten button rattle from a six and a half foot rattlesnake they had encountered along the trail. After her father departed again in search of the elusive quail, Florence, her mother and the second guide followed behind and a short distance east of the camp, they stopped to rest. Leaning against a large tree, Florence spotted a twitch of movement out of the corner of her eye and found herself within a few feet of her worst fear. Coiled and ready to strike was a monstrous "wily serpent." Florence had heard no audible warning of the rattlesnake because she held the missing ten button rattle in her pocket. Luckily, Florence's guide was nearby and seeing the terror on her face, killed the giant snake which had only been stunned in the first encounter. Despite such a dramatic experience, Florence wrote of subsequent visits through the hole in the wall guided by Ed Frank, the owner of the land that provided passage into the enchanted world beyond.



Hole in the Wall Created Circa 1900

Unlike many of the other Little Farms owners, Ed chose not to farm his land for commercial use. Instead, it was a gentleman's ranch where an abundance of other animals such as horses, pigs, goats, pheasants, swans and alligators thrived, primarily due to his son Peter's love of animals. Ed and Katie spent their spare time tending to vegetable and flower gardens and leased a portion of their property to allow other local farmers to grow and sell their produce. Occasionally some of the cattle were taken to market, but turning a profit was never the primary objective.

Paul Frank with his Plane and Swamp Buggy



There were several open pastures on what are now the 9th, 12th, 13th and 18th fairways of WCC where roughly 50 head of cattle grazed, including Guernsey, Angus and Brangus varieties. Years later, Ed's son Paul, who owned a single engine Maule airplane built for short landings and takeoffs, would land his plane in the pasture that is now the 18th fairway at WCC. On occasion, he would need to fly low and buzz the sleeping cows so he could land safely and park his plane in a hanger located between today's driving range and the 9th green.

The Frank family loved to hunt on their wooded property, but navigating by foot was challenging, especially in summer when heavy rainfall caused muddy conditions. Leveraging his extraordinary mechanical skills, Ed built a ranch vehicle with an elevated chassis that had the appearance of a souped-up Model T with chains strapped on large truck tires that allowed for easier navigation over tree stumps and wetlands. Without much thought of any new invention, Ed had created the very first swamp buggy! Over time, he and his sons built many other iterations of the useful vehicle that could take them deep beyond the hole in the wall and onto Seminole trails where better hunting could be found. In 1949, at the urging of the editor of the Collier County News, Ed helped organize the first swamp buggy races which still continue today.

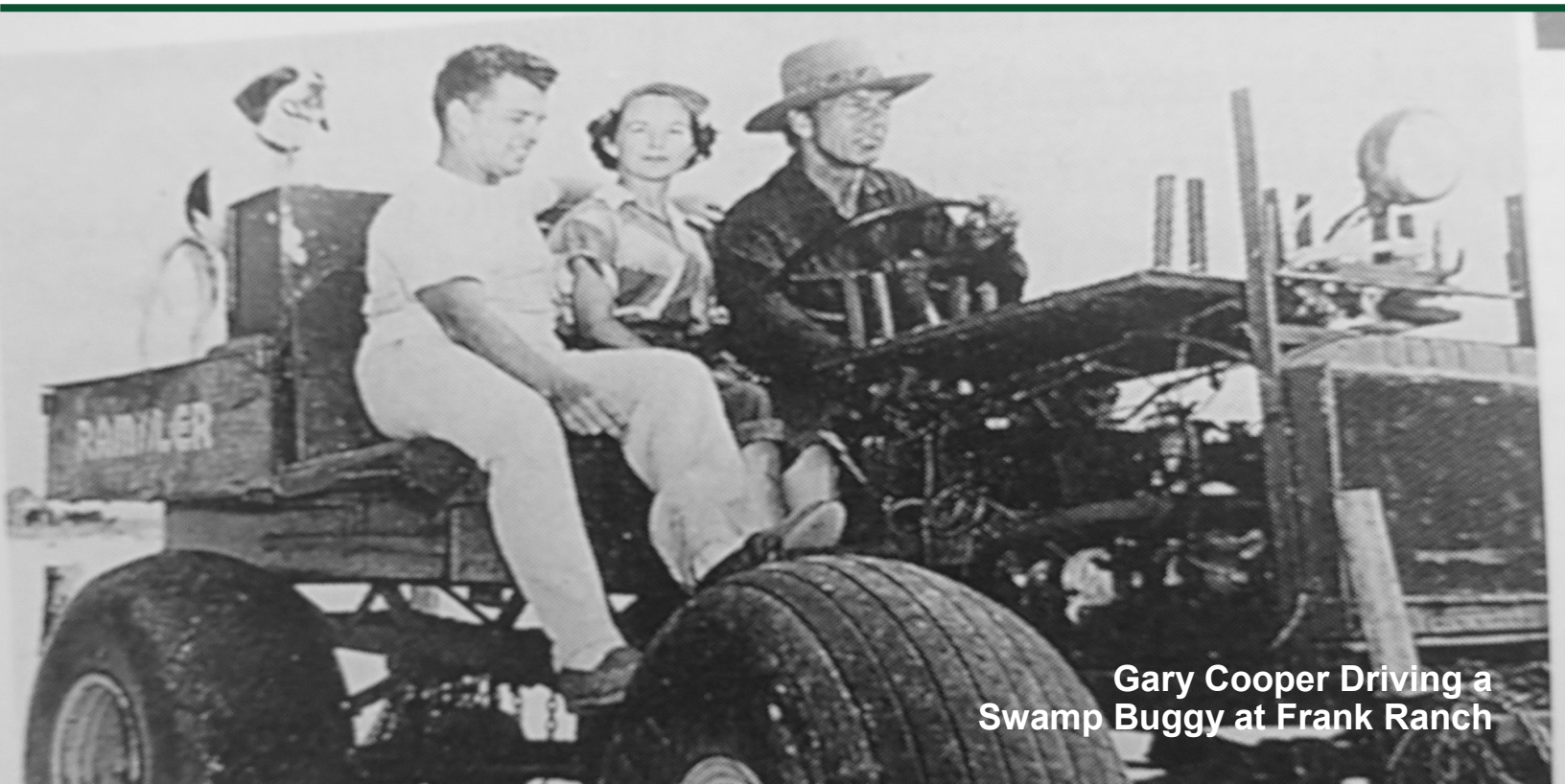


**Ed Frank in his
Original Swamp Buggy**



**Paul Frank and his
Uncle at a Swamp Buggy Race**

Two movies were filmed in part on the property and created some local buzz at the time. In 1951, Gary Cooper starred in a Florida western called "Distant Drums", set during the Second Seminole War in the 1840's with Cooper playing an army captain battling the Native Americans. Two years later, the land was leased again for another American adventure film named "Shark River," starring Steve Cochran and Carole Mathews.



**Gary Cooper Driving a
Swamp Buggy at Frank Ranch**

CHANGING TIMES FOR NAPLES & THE FRANKS

In the mid-1950s, Naples began transitioning from a secluded millionaire's hideaway at the end of Alligator Alley to the tourist destination it would soon become. Adjacent to the Frank property, better infrastructure was taking shape in the form of a two-lane dirt and shell road, the forerunner to Goodlette Frank Road, and rail road tracks just west of the road to accommodate the Eastern Seaboard Railway. A freight train, starting in downtown Naples, stopped daily at a loading dock adjacent to where Solana Road is now located to pick up produce grown by owners of the Little Farms.

Golf across America was also becoming a popular pastime, however, the only available course could be found at the Naples Beach and Golf Hotel. For years the locals could purchase annual memberships in Naples sole golf course, but demand eventually surpassed supply and the hotel guests were given priority, making it more difficult for local residents to play. In early 1957 during a fishing trip, Ed Frank and three friends discussed the possibility of starting a private golf club on the northern 200 acres of Ed's ranch. Conversation quickly turned to action and on June 20, 1957, a three-year lease with an option to buy the land for \$310,000, was signed and the Hole in the Wall Golf Club became a reality. The Frank family stayed well connected to the venture as Ed's son Paul became the superintendent or greens keeper at "The Hole" during its first 15 years.

During the summer of 1957, the family moved their cattle and other animals down to the remaining southern 220 acres of their ranch where their two homesteads were already situated. That same year Ed and Katie decided it was time to move to a larger home. They started construction on a new house adjacent to the WCC 7th fairway where their son Peter lives today. Paul already occupied a small house, located directly behind what are now the Bocce courts at Frank Park. Paul also built a green metal garage to store a boat and other vehicles which remains today as the maintenance facility for WCC rental golf carts.



The Frank Family Ranch Circa 1955

THE PLANNING PHASE OF WILDERNESS COUNTRY CLUB



The cattle ranch continued without significant change into the 1970s, but as the family expanded to a new generation, conversations stirred as to what to do next with the remaining land. Suggestions included converting the property to a storage facility or a trailer park. Fortunately Paul, who had become well versed on golf course management at "The Hole," convinced his father to consider creating a new golf club with a residential community to be built within a true wilderness setting. Ed liked the idea since he loved his Cypress trees and wanted to do everything possible to protect as much of the existing habitat as feasible.

By 1973, the family reached agreement to build another golf course within a residential community and local developers Wes Downing and Earl Frye (D&F) were hired to get the wheels turning. D&F had recently completed a successful 700 acre project at Royal Poinciana just north of the Frank property, which was more than enough evidence that they could handle the 220 acre Wilderness project, of which 135 acres would be allocated to the golf course. Moreover, Wes Downing was a former Mayor of Naples and Earl Frye was a Director of the First National Bank of Naples, so both gentlemen were well connected and knew how to navigate town politics and influence the "right" people.

Their first setback, however, was encountered when Ed refused to sign a lease agreement with an option to buy the land outright, because two of the family homesteads remained occupied on the property. After further negotiations, D&F convinced Ed to accept a 99-year lease on the future golf course, tennis courts and clubhouse, thereby avoiding the stress of having to sell the Frank family homesteads.

The state restricted a lease arrangement on privately-owned property, so all the planned condominiums were required to be owned outright by the new members. Original construction plans called for multiple two and three-story buildings totaling 400 units, all set well back from the golf course. There was also talk of a five or six story high rise building to be situated in the northeast corner of the property near what is today the 14th green. Those plans were abandoned to avoid creating what was deemed to be an eyesore within the natural habitat. The developers eventually decided to limit the community to 300 units which they felt would be the optimal number to promote exclusivity and allow easier access to the golf course.

A deal was struck between D&F and Ed Frank to pay \$2,000 per unit or \$600,000 total for the land where the condominiums would eventually be built. With documents signed and plans underway, D&F named their project Wilderness Country Club, although the Frank family was known to refer to their land as "the wilderness" long before.

The development of WCC was not without its challenges. Financing was an initial obstacle because most banks viewed any project east of Route 41 as having diminished value. Shortly after D&F secured a loan with Franklin Bank in New York, the bank filed for Chapter 11 protection and the search was on for a new mortgage lender. In the early 1970's, there was also a housing recession in Naples and the building construction company that D&F wanted to hire couldn't secure a bond to get the project underway. A second company on their search list fell into bankruptcy so they were forced to collaborate with a start-up, hired on a trial basis with the directive to limit construction to the first three buildings, allowing D&F to carefully evaluate their ability.

BREAKING GROUND

Financing continued to be difficult to obtain until a New York businessman named Ritter Shumway provided a critical infusion of cash and new evidence that the project was legitimate and worthy of a much bigger bank loan. That loan finally evolved when the Women's Federal Savings & Loan Bank in Cleveland agreed to provide a \$30 million line of credit. Mr. Shumway became a limited partner and his son Charlie, still a member at WCC, became a managing partner with D&F and the on-site project manager. Charlie and three others worked out of what is now the maintenance facility adjacent to the 5th tee box in a small office with only three desks and a couch. Sometime later two trailers were brought onto the property and stationed near the current tennis center to serve as the golf pro shop and the sales office.

It was agreed by the new management and finance teams that the golf course would be built first, so condominium buyers could be sure that their major amenity was in place before they made an investment. All members would also have beautiful views of the golf course from their living spaces which would enhance the value of each residential unit and better entice new prospects to buy at Wilderness. Another smart decision was to provide security for owners by building an entryway and hiring a guard at the front entrance, making WCC the first gated community in Collier County. Today there are more than 300 such gated communities.



1974

TEMPORARY PRO SHOP and sales offices, which will be replaced once construction progresses.



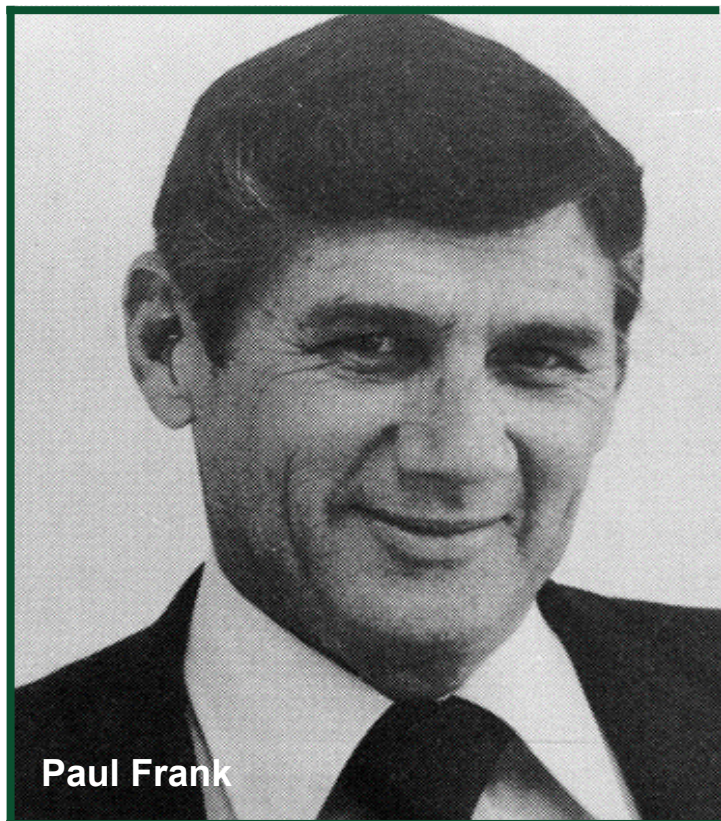
First Golf Pro, Land Planner & Golf Course Architect at WCC 40th Anniversary Celebration in 2015

D&F made another very wise decision by hiring Bill Vines as the land planner for the Wilderness project. Bill had significant prior experience with the county commissioner's office and a good working relationship with the Planning & Engineering staff. Bill recommended to D&F that a Planned Unit Development document (PUD) be filed rather than being subject to the conventional zoning and subdivision standards. Everything revolved around the primary objective of maintaining as much natural beauty of the surrounding land as possible. Having a PUD document in hand meant that the development team wasn't bound by the restrictive clearing and setback requirements stated in the county's subdivision regulations. More importantly, the PUD gave Bill Vines the opportunity to

challenge the construction company to leave the mature moss-laden oaks, cypress, palm, pine and palmetto trees and many of the tropical shrubs and plants in their native habitat, right up to the street edges. Bill also negotiated with the utility companies to bury electric and cable TV lines by creating trenches that carefully meandered around trees and vegetation, rather than installing them in the typical straight-line 20 foot setback that most golf communities are committed to today. Bill believed so much in the project that he became one of the original owners and still lives at Wilderness today.

Paul Frank was introduced to golf architect Arthur Hills during the construction of the Hole in the Wall project and convinced him to meet with the development team to discuss designing of the Wilderness course. Eventually, Hills won the contract to develop WCC with the explicit charge of preserving as much of the natural beauty as logistically possible. WCC was one of Mr. Hills' first golf projects and he embraced the challenge of designing the course while preserving wildlife and the park-like setting around him. Years later, Hills claimed that building fairways adjacent to the forest of cypress trees such as those lining the 15th fairway would likely be impossible today given their close proximity to wetlands. On a much smaller scale, Hills demonstrated his willingness to save the natural environment by carving a cart path that circumvented trees and shrubs from the 13th green to the 14th tee box, much like "Mr. Toad's Wild Ride" at Disney World with its twists and turns.

Upon completion of the golf course, which cost roughly \$980,000, Arthur Hills called his creation "a rare, tropical enclave – really a paradise." With heavy-wooded forest lining many of the fairways and twelve ponds encompassing 22 acres of water, there was plenty of challenge for golfers of all abilities, even though the course was considered relatively short at 6,652 yards from the tips or back tees.





THE EARLY YEARS AT WILDERNESS COUNTRY CLUB

With 15 years of valuable experience as superintendent at Hole in the Wall CC, Paul Frank negotiated a contract with D&F to become greens keeper at the new Wilderness course where he worked for 25 years, building WCC's reputation as one of the best manicured courses in Naples. Maintaining the very best golf experience has always been a high priority at WCC and Arthur Hills was asked to return in 2004 to completely refurbish the course. Eleven years later, during the summer of 2015, all the greens were reconstructed to eliminate invasive grasses and improve playability. In addition, the driving range and short game area were expanded and entirely refurbished during the summer of 2016. At the beginning, Bill Vines suggested another creative idea that would allow every residential owner to have a small garage for extra storage space and ample room to house a personal golf cart. The intent was to diminish auto traffic around the property, thereby reducing noise and pollution and allow members a relaxed golf experience without trail fees. For members who preferred to walk, Arthur Hills's course design was well thought-out to promote easy access between greens and tee boxes. Today, WCC remains one of the few courses in Southwest Florida to allow golfers to carry their bag or walk with a push cart any time of day.

While Wilderness was officially founded in 1974, the grand opening for the golf course was January 1, 1975. John Carroll, an assistant golf professional at Royal Poinciana was recruited to become head pro at WCC where he served for 10 years. At the 40th anniversary of WCC in January, 2015, John shared an amusing story that took place early in his tenure. A member approached him with the news that a friend and his son were in Naples and wanted to play the golf course the following morning. John countered that it was Ladies Day and it might be challenging to accommodate two males on the course. The member refused to budge and insisted that John make room. As it turned out, the guests were Bing Crosby and his son who invaded the ladies time on the course, but quickly departed after the round and no fuss was ever made. During the late 1970s, virtually every politician and banker in town found a way to play Wilderness and in the spring of 1976, Vice President Gerald Ford, referred by a member, also enjoyed a free round at the course. Some notable pros who have played at WCC since its inception include Gene Sarazen, Gary Player, Chi Chi Rodriguez and Fuzzy Zeller.



Wilderness Country Club Golf Course Holes #18 & #10

WHAT MAKES WILDERNESS SPECIAL?

Wilderness remains a truly unique property in southwest Florida. The clubhouse sits on the second highest point in Collier County, at a modest twelve feet above sea level, (The highest point of land can be found in Marco Island.) and the entire property rests above a mega aquifer (a geologic formation consisting of underground layers of rock saturated with water that can be transmitted to wells or springs) which stretches down and around the Goodlette Frank and Golden Gate roads. There are 52 wells from the aquifer that provide water for the city of Naples and two of those wells can be found on the south property line. Several other wells on the WCC grounds are utilized for irrigation of the golf course.

Paul Frank's original homestead and the five acres of surrounding land was renamed Frank Park in a dedication to the Frank family in 2013. Within the park are nearly three dozen specimen trees from all over the world, each labeled with their common and Latin names and place of origin. Ed's son Peter lived part of his adult life in southern California, but returned often to his family roots in Naples before finally purchasing his parents' home, adjacent to the 7th fairway, in 1998. Peter loved to travel to exotic lands and during each trip would purchase seeds for trees common to that part of the world. Upon his return home to California, Peter would plant the seeds in small pots and nurture them.

In an era when airlines were much more lax than they are today about carrying agricultural products cross country, Peter carefully transported his new trees and replanted them on his brother Paul's property at Wilderness. Today, Frank Park is adorned with majestic specimen tree, including the Oil Palm and Ackee tree from West Africa, the Croton tree from the South Pacific, the Shrubby Yellow Pine from China and the Royal Palm from Cuba.

Given the abundance of wildlife and nature that thrives inside the gates of Wilderness, it was no surprise that WCC became a designated Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary in April, 1999. Today there remains a constant but healthy challenge as how best to protect and preserve the beautiful trees and vegetation while also providing enough sunlight and fertilizers to keep the grass healthy and vibrant on the golf course. In 2014, professional arborists and landscape designers were hired as consultants to oversee the strategic cutting of tree limbs and elimination of invasive plants around the golf course to promote better growth of specimen plants, shrubs and trees and allow more sunlight and circulation of air.

Wildlife is always evident on the grounds of Wilderness which boasts over 80 species of birds. Several man-made nests accommodate Ospreys that mate and hatch offspring each spring and seven Eastern Bluebird boxes have been strategically placed around the property to house a once declining species. Other favorites among bird watchers include White Ibis, Anhingas, Great Blue Herons, Red Shouldered Hawks, Bald Eagles, Barred Owls and Swallow Tail Kites. Alligators enjoy swimming in the ponds and turtles, raccoons and possums wander freely with little fear of the residents. In the 1970s, Florida panthers were spotted on the property and on rare, but always memorable occasions, bobcats still strut across a fairway and into the distant woods.

There is so much harmony and protection of wildlife on the grounds that the Conservancy of Southwest Florida uses Wilderness as a safe place to return rehabilitated animals, such as turtles, hawks and owls, to their native environment. Since 2014, WCC has collaborated with the Conservancy on their Upper Gordon River Wildlife Corridor project. Several cameras have been mounted on the property to monitor movement of wildlife species and in season (October – May), dedicated members of WCC conduct an ongoing survey of wildlife in and around the ponds several times each week.



Wilderness remains a self-governed community with an active and dedicated Board of Directors who represent the best interests of the members as well as the protection and preservation of the property on which they live. Continuous improvements are a high priority and the evolution of the tennis courts would be a good example. In the late 1970s, two hard surfaced courts were installed. Years later, demand called for an expansion of two additional courts, but the asphalt surface was not a popular option among the members. Instead, a rug like surface, with sand mixed in, replaced the hard courts in the 1990s. That surface was too fast and didn't match up well with the aging demographics of many Wilderness tennis players. In 2004, after careful deliberation, it was agreed to renovate the entire tennis center with Har-true clay courts which included an underground irrigation system. The end result has been highly successful and today the tennis program is more popular than ever on what local area pros call the best conditioned courts in Collier County.

Demand for additional facilities was proposed by various members and the Board responded by arranging for the installation of four clay Bocce courts in 2014 and a regulation size croquet court in the summer of 2015. Both enhancements are carefully situated among the beautiful specimen trees in Frank Park, promoting a tranquil setting, surrounded by nature.



WHY WILDERNESS?

Looking back over the history of Wilderness CC, one consistent theme is the friendly, caring and outgoing character of its membership. With only 300 units, friendships are easily made and newcomers feel immediately welcome in a community setting where everyone cares deeply about the special place they live. When prospective members enter the gates of Wilderness for the first time, they experience an awe for the natural beauty of the jungle-like entrance that is so reminiscent of old Florida. Today, the location of Wilderness Country Club - less than ten minutes from old Naples, the Waterside shops and the Mercato while also close enough to the beach that Peter Frank can remember riding horses with his brothers along the water's edge - is the envy of many other clubs in Collier County.

It is safe to assume that Ed Frank and all his family would be very proud of the way their former Hole in the Wall Ranch has evolved with the times, always with a consistent focus on maintaining and improving the natural environment that dominates this unique and beautiful property.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There is nothing like first-hand knowledge when it comes to gathering facts and historic details. Many thanks to Peter Frank, the last of his generation, who showed me around the property and shared some wonderful memories of his youth growing up on the family ranch. Charlie Shumway and Bill Vines, who were personally responsible for what is Wilderness Country Club today, shared invaluable information about the early years. Kathy Whitbeck was a huge help in editing this history document and Aimee Smith for designing of the document. Bill Thomson, our resident historian and archivist, provided a wealth of documents, manuscripts, articles and photos that were full of fabulous information. From start to finish, it was a great team effort!

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