

Reprinted Courtesy of The Carolinas Golf Association
as appeared in Winter 2011 *Carolinas Golf Magazine*.



FROM VISION TO LANDMARK

THE FOUNDERS OF GRANDFATHER GOLF & COUNTRY CLUB / written by LEE PACE

There was the crack golfer with the land and the vision.
There was the public relations wizard with his contacts and a camera.
And there was the oil man with deep pockets and a keen business sense.

Together, Aggie Morton Cocke Woodruff, Hugh Morton, and John Williams conceived, nurtured, and cultivated one of the Carolina's foremost golf venues — Grandfather Golf & Country Club in Linville, N.C.

The club celebrated the legacies of the Morton siblings and Williams in 2011 by creating the Founders Cup and holding an inaugural celebratory tournament last June. Sixty-eight two-man teams competed in four-ball match play, but one of the main highlights was an evening dinner program that included a short talk from Williams, now 93 years old and a summer resident at Grandfather.

“A lot of members felt they had a general idea of the formation of the club but not the specifics,” says club Director of Golf Chip King. “Many were hearing the story for the first time. Now they have a much better appreciation for what a unique blend of talents and personalities went into creating this wonderful club.”

The story of Grandfather and, in fact, the town of Linville itself begins with Donald MacRae Sr., a Wilmington businessman who developed interests in minerals mining in the mountains in the late 1800s. He and a group of investors conceived the settlement of Linville and

creation of the original Esecola Inn. Eventually the MacRae family would own nearly 16,000 acres of land in Avery County.

Grandson Julian Morton lived in Wilmington and was an accomplished golfer and an early president of the Carolinas Golf Association

in 1934 and 1935. He taught his daughter Aggie to play golf, and she was an excellent competitor as a young girl. At age 15, she won the consolation bracket of the championship flight of the Women's Carolinas Amateur. She played on the boys' golf team at New Hanover High and made the quarterfinals of the 1948 U.S. Women's Amateur.

Aggie's brother Hugh had fiddled with golf as a youth but developed a keen interest in photography. He was a counselor at a camp in Linville in 1939 when a tow-headed 14-year-old boy shockingly took the lead in the first round of the prestigious Linville Men's Invitational. The sports editor of *The Charlotte News* called the club for a photo of the lad; the golf staff summoned young Morton to take a picture. He shipped it to Charlotte — it was one of the first photographs published from Hugh Morton. It was also the first golf tournament win for the 14-year-old kid from Tarboro, Harvie Ward.

Aggie and Hugh inherited parcels of some 2,000 acres each of mountain land from their grandfather in 1952. Hugh used his to create the Grandfather Mountain scenic attraction. Aggie's land was situated in the Linville River Valley, and it occurred to her in 1964 exactly what



› Above; Bob Hope, James Holshouser, General William Westmoreland, Clifford Roberts, and Bob Kletcke. Opposite page: Aggie Morton with Ellis Maples.



› Grandfather No. 6

she could do with it. Frustrated by the crowded conditions at Linville Golf Club, she said, “I think we need another golf course here.”

The idea sprouted into reality when Aggie hired Ellis Maples, a Donald Ross disciple. He agreed to design the course within several of her design parameters: Every hole should be self-contained in the forest around it, and, where possible, natural mountain backdrops should be focal points in hole layouts. Construction started in 1965.

“Aggie loved the area and she was excited about the construction and the building of her dream,” says Bob Kletcke, who at the time was the assistant pro at Linville GC in the summer and at Augusta National in the winter. “I can remember her excitement showing me the plans — she opened them up on the trunk of a car and showed me every hole. Of course, it’s pretty hard to visualize it looking at a blueprint of what a hole is going to look like. But it really turned out great.”

As the project evolved, Aggie realized she needed help in the business, marketing, and financial realms. The project was costing significantly more than envisioned because of the difficulty of moving rock and clearing the thick forests to make room for golf holes. That’s when brother Hugh and John Williams stepped in.

Williams grew up in Cuba but spent time in the summer in Linville, where he and Morton met as young boys and became lifelong friends. Williams now lived in Tulsa, running the Williams Companies, an oil and gas exploration concern. Hugh knew his photographic and promotional skills could tell the story of the new club, and his extensive contacts in business and government would help grease wheels for permits and attract interest from potential members. Williams understood how to talk to bankers and lawyers and negotiate financing. His banker on the Grandfather account was a young man named Hugh McColl, who was on the rise at a new bank called North Carolina National Bank — which he would later build into the financial powerhouse, NationsBank.

The club opened with an exhibition in the fall of 1968 that featured Billy Joe Patton, Chi Chi Rodriguez, Charlie “Choo Choo” Justice, and Kletcke, who became the club’s first head pro. From the beginning the course has consistently ranked as one of the top two or three in

the state. Between 1971 and 2003, Grandfather G&CC hosted four Carolinas-Virginias team matches as well as other CGA events.

“We overcame a lot—cost overruns, 21 percent interest rates, oil prices soaring,” says Williams. “But the beauty of the land and a great golf course eventually prevailed. We sold all the lots and turned the club over to the members in the early 1980s.”

That heritage combined with the club’s desire to create an event several notches above the typical member-guest led to the idea for the Founders Cup, which will become an annual event. Tim Arnault and Kevin Glaser won the tournament, beating Robert Gafaell Jr. and Bill Hyder in the championship match.

“We have a member-guest and various ‘fun’ tournaments,” says Tournament Chairman Barry Cook. “But we thought, ‘We have such a wonderful golf course, why not showcase it with a top-notch competitive tournament?’ We drew a very strong field for our first one—five players with plus-handicaps and 28 at five or better.”

The weekend included a Friday night presentation on the contributions of the three founders. Aggie Cocke Woodruff and John Williams attended. Williams addressed the group with stories of comedian Bob Hope, who visited as the guest of club member Gen. William Westmoreland and brought 11 suitcases for the weekend, and club member Clifford Roberts, the co-founder of Augusta National Golf Club.

Hugh Morton, who died in 2006, liked to tell the story of the dour and demanding Roberts visiting the club shortly after its opening.

“Everyone was quivering and quaking, scared to death about his visit,” Morton said. “I made up my mind I wasn’t going to be intimidated. I didn’t ask him how he liked the course, because I didn’t want him to have the chance to cut us down.”

On the final day of the visit, Morton had lunch with Roberts.

“Hugh, most mountain golf courses aren’t worth a damn,” Roberts said. “But this is the best one I’ve seen.”

Over 43 years, most who visit certainly agree.

› Lee Pace is a frequent contributor to Carolinas Golf.