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# - FADED - GLORIES

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The Very Best People are perfectly happy inside the gates of The Country Club, where nothing ever happens. That, of course, is the way they like it.

IT IS NOT CALLED The Brookline Country Club, although the club is in Brookline and is populated largely by Brookliners. The club leaves such parochialism to its poor relations in Belmont, Weston, and Wellesley. Nor is it — heavens, no — named anything quaint like The Squirrel Country Club, although the squirrel is the club's emblem and is so adored that a stuffed squirrel is exhibited in the clubhouse with a tiny putter in its paws. No, it is The Country Club. Period. It is listed under *T* in the phone book. Its monogram, adorning the locker-room bath towels, luncheon menus, and club chairs, is TCC — the *C*'s clinging to the *T* like perfect ringers in a game of horseshoes.

It is said that club founder J. Murray Forbes, of the China trade Forbeses, titled his creation The Country Club in 1882 because it was the first in America. (He'd picked up the idea, according to one account, during a childhood visit to a club in Shanghai that offered Americans a pleasant combination of food and sports.) Consequently, there was no other country club from which his needed to be distinguished.

Now, of course, there are many such clubs featuring the same TCC mix of golf, tennis, and social intercourse, but The Country Club holds onto its name. And the twelve hundred clubmen pronounce the words with the same nonchalance as did the founder. However much the members might secretly relish the historical supremacy of their beloved club, none would ever be so snooty as to pronounce it *The Country Club*, with a long *e*, as he might say of two of its more notable members, "*the Dr. Carter R. Rowe*" or "*the Elliot Richardson*." It's a short *e*, as he might say "*the city*," meaning Boston. The members of The Country Club don't bother to distinguish their club from any other. In their minds, The Country Club is the only one.

My family belonged to The Country Club until I was in my early teens, when,

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BY JOHN SEDGWICK

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following a tradition of old Boston families, my parents decided their annual membership fee, then about one thousand dollars, had gotten too steep. My memories of the place are all yellow, as if they'd aged like newspapers or color photographs. I remember the big yellow clubhouse, ringed with piazzas like a southern plantation, the yellow fairways in August, the blazing yellow sun from which we sought refuge in the club swimming pool. While there is a tawny, faded quality to the club, the reason I should see it in yellow is much simpler: yellow and green are the club colors. But that is apt; club life oscillates between those two — the green of youth and vitality, the yellow of age and decay.

I went away to school and then on to college, and caught up in the rebellions of my generation, I put The Country Club out of my mind as a relic of a childhood that was best forgotten. But when I hit my thirties and found some of my friends drifting back to the club (drawn, they invariably tell me, to its sports facilities, not its status), my thoughts turned back to it once more. I wondered what, if anything, I was missing.

As I began to make some delicate inquiries about the place, however, I was made aware of the membership's tribal nature as I never had been as a child. When I asked members about the club, a sudden chill came over the conversation, as if I had just asked about their sex lives. With friends and acquaintances, I weathered this by emphasizing that I had myself been a member, and that loosened them up a bit. With strangers, I got nowhere. Even when I enlisted friends as go-betweens, none of the old guard would talk to me about the club. As one member finally explained, the standard member of The Country Club expects to get his name in the paper precisely three times: when he is born, when he is married, and when he dies. I would probably get more from him if I asked him to talk for publication about his wife.

Figuring that the club hierarchy would have learned to mollify reporters by tossing them a few scraps, I called the club's president, Gerald Church. I was assured by several people that he was "a good guy." In any case, I figured that I had the inside track, since his brother Dick, also a club member, had been my football coach at my old elementary school, Dexter. "We don't offer any information about the club," Gerald Church informed me tersely.

I asked why.

"It's general policy," he replied. "We're a private club, and we choose to stay private with little or no publicity. It's a position about which we feel very strongly. We don't talk to the press."

I told him that this was an unusual policy in the media age, and for a moment he turned wistful: "Maybe that's why we're the way we are."

Sensing an opening, I asked how long this policy had been in effect. "Forever," Church said, closing our interview. I turned to other tactics.

**A**LTHOUGH The Country Club takes up 237 acres of Brookline, a spread assessed by the town at \$6.4 million, it is a hard place to find. The compound is walled off by a picket fence topped with barbed wire and screened from sight by a thick row of trees. Its one entrance comes off a small side road, Clyde Street, and is marked only with a small sign. But once I reached the driveway with its speed bump, a flood of childhood memories came back to me. I instinctively cast an anxious glance up to my right toward the fifteenth tee. From there the fairway crosses the drive to a distant hole, and in summer, golf balls fly over the road like artillery shells.

Up ahead stood the yellow clubhouse (the yellow of the front, I noticed, a shade too green to match the yellow of the back), with a yellow-and-green TCC flag flapping atop its mast. Beyond the clubhouse, I spotted the strange hangarlike indoor-tennis building I used to play in as a child. Then the brick indoor curling rink, a kind of frozen-over bowling alley where devotees slide granite stones down the ice while a partner with a broom scampers ahead, madly sweeping a path to the winning spot. Then the garage, now housing a fleet of lawnmowers, and the golfers' Locker House. I parked my car out front beside a baby-blue Plymouth bearing a license plate that read, "I don't have wealth or fame. I'm just ME." I figured it belonged to the help.

Although the club is only five and a half miles from downtown Boston, I could see no evidence of urban civilization as I looked around. No skyscrapers poke up above the elms and maples, no street noises disturb the quiet rustling of

the leaves, no pollution befouls the club's sweet air. Well, actually there *was* one blot on the horizon. In the distance beyond the sixth hole, on a hill, a broad gymnasium has risen up at Dexter School's quarters in a former monastery. But I learned later that there had been talk among clubmen about planting a stand of pine saplings to conceal it, eventually, from their view.

I strode up the walkway, through the main entrance, to the switchboard operator. She directed me to the living room, a bright room full of blues and greens that seemed just right for a church social, where I was to meet my aunt. A solid figure with gray hair and a silver tennis racket pinned to her Sunday-best red dress, she was seated on the couch, studying the menu through half-moon reading glasses. "It's not too busy now," she said with a nod toward the empty chairs around us, "but it will be filled tonight."

I asked how she knew.

"It's Thursday night," she explained. "Maids' night out."

Talking in a low voice, she filled me in about the general trends among the membership since I was last there. "It used to be old Boston WASP money, now it's new Boston WASP money," she said. "I come in here sometimes, and I don't know a soul. Now it's your crowd. It's yuppies. But I believe we behaved just as badly."

There was a doorway on the far side of the room. "You

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If anybody talked about money, one member said, "I imagine everyone would listen with great interest. And think a lot less of him."

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ought to wander over there," she said. "I can't go. Well, I have gone, but I'm not supposed to." She meant the "gentlemen's quarters." To get there, I passed through a kind of depressurized zone, a reasonably well furnished drawing room that serves as the site of cocktail parties for prospective members, part of the admission procedure. It was lined on one wall with a case full of silver golf and curling trophies, all of them engraved with the winners' names and then, seemingly, forgotten. In front of the sofa stood a glass case full of colorful pins from curling clubs in such unexpected places as Omaha and Spokane.

Then I entered the Men's Grill.

Although The Country Club does admit women onto the premises, it doesn't let them in all that far. Ladies are considered "accessories," as one wife put it. It's a men's club. Only men are entitled to full membership. If a woman's husband dies, or if the two are divorced, she has to apply for readmission. Out on the main golf course, women are required to defer to men at prime times on weekend and holiday mornings. And the clubhouse has a separate "Gentlemen's Entrance," marked with a small brass plaque on the door, which leads to the Men's Grill. In case anyone should miss the point, there is the club equivalent of a stop sign in the hall in front of the grill bearing the words "Men Only."

If the living room where I met my aunt represents the men in their domestication, the Men's Grill shows their essential, unreconstructed nature — relaxed, rowdy, and ready for beer. For that purpose, the room was done in basic rumpus-room style, with unbreakable wooden chairs and wood-paneled walls hung with hunting scenes.

Here the members can sit back and talk about their golf games. It is a tacit rule, underscored by the casual atmosphere of the place, that nothing more serious ever be brought up. "You don't discuss Proust at The Country Club," one member told me. "I save that for the locker room at the Harvard Club." Of all serious topics, the one most scrupulously avoided is money. I asked Tom Cutler, a skeet shooter and member of the Skeet Shooting Committee at The Country Club, what would happen if anybody did talk money in the Men's Grill. "You mean, if somebody started talking about his bank balance?" he repeated, incredulous. "I never heard that. Never." If someone *did*, though, I pressed. "Well," he replied. "I imagine that everyone around him would listen with great interest. And they would all think a *lot* less of him."

Conscious that the green-coated barkeep's eyes were upon me, I crossed the Men's Grill into the library, also for men only. A dark green room with leather chairs and an ancient color television set, it featured an untouched collection of classic novels, a well-thumbed assortment of mysteries, and in a locked case to indicate their ultimate desirability, several shelves of books offering instruction on such gentlemanly sports as hunting, yachting, and of course golf.

I swung back through the Men's Grill and slipped out into

the hallway, where the walls were covered with plaques commemorating seemingly every sporting accomplishment in the club's 103-year history. About the only free spot bore a case displaying J. Murray Forbes's original golf clubs, now as brown and splintered as old dinosaur bones. Then I tiptoed upstairs. I had heard that some of the elderly clubmen would take up residence in the upper rooms from time to time. I found an open door at the top of the stairs with a sign reading "Phone Members Before Entering" (although no telephone was evident) and, in a far more daunting sentence, "Rule Number Six Applies Here." I dared do no more than peek down the hall, which reminded me of a prep school dormitory, and then retreated back downstairs to my aunt.

As we ate lunch, I pumped her for stories about the club, but although she was a fund of information on other social topics, she could think only of the sad tale of Charlie DiPerri's hair. The balding DiPerri, the assistant club maitre d', had undergone a hair transplant with a firm that had succeeded only in turning his scalp into something resembling raw hamburger. He'd sued, won a handsome award, and then invested the proceeds in Steve's Ice Cream for even bigger profits. Despite his new wealth, he had continued to work at the club, where he was known for an imperious manner. My aunt also whispered a few words about possible scandal involving clubmen who dined regularly at The Country Club even though they claimed for tax purposes that their legal residence was in Maine. Beyond that she drew a blank, and it left me wondering — didn't anything ever happen here?

Another member  
said he had no  
reason to be nervous  
at his admissions  
cocktails;  
he'd known everyone  
in the room  
his entire life.

IN THE Green Book, The Country Club's own Bible, all the secrets of the place are laid bare: a list of members, dues, organizational structure, and House Rules. When I had reached the safety of my car, I quickly thumbed through to find out about Rule Number Six, which presented the narrow terms on which the club allowed guests to stay in the upstairs bedrooms. What the sign really meant was No Hanky-Panky.

Nearly one hundred and fifty pages long, and filled with such Proper Bostonian distinctions as that between a "visitor" (who lives within forty miles of Boston) and a "stranger" (who lives beyond forty miles), the Green Book offers great insight into the Country Club mind. It is thorough, precise, and tough. "No one with spiked or hob-nailed shoes is permitted in any part of the Club House, except the Grill Room," reads House Rule Number Eight. "No member shall personally reprimand any employee or servant of the Club. All complaints and suggestions must be made in writing to the Board of Governors," intones By-law Number Ten. "Dogs shall not be allowed in the Club House or on the Piazzas, but may be left at the chauffeur's room in the garage," goes House Rule Number Thirteen. The Green Book has the tone a stern father might take with a wayward child, and it goes a long way toward explaining why the club seems so tame.



There's a good reason for this. In his 1907 book of travel notes, *The American Scene*, Henry James acclaims America's country clubs, specifically mentioning "a blest Country Club — in the neighborhood of Boston," for the way they "accept the Family as the social unit." Indeed, even today, the dues structure encourages family membership. Wives and children of members get in free; and, to encourage continuity, a substantial Entrance Fee is forfeited if the member resigns. Like most members, I had always gone there with my family, all five of us jammed into the Ford Falcon to cool off at the pool.

James saw this as the final extension of American democracy; the country club showed "the younger are 'as good' as the elder." But although the club does raise children to the level of their parents, it also lowers parents to the level of their children. In this, The Country Club today resembles one monstrous family, with a stern Victorian father at the top in the person of its president, who rules the household through no less than eighteen committees, and the membership a horde of little children. As one member characterized his peers, "They're great people to play games with. They're made for fun and games."

Furthermore, like a species all their own, most of the clubmen seem to be direct descendants of the original founders. If J. Murray Forbes drove up today in a coach-and-four, I doubt he would have trouble placing many of the members. Of the eleven members of the founding committee, the surnames of nine are still amply represented in the club roster. And J. Murray's tongue would probably not trip over many of the other names on the Green Book's current list, which glides gently from Adamses to Gardners to Whitneys and provides a supply of old-Boston stock so good and solid it must represent most of the boards of trustees in the metropolitan area. Although the club professes to make no distinction "on account of a candidate's religion, national origin or race," there are no blacks, and only a few Jews. "Jewish WASPS," one member observed. Not long ago, a Japanese golfer was seen toiling on one of the greens, but when a shocked member inquired, it turned out that he was from the Japanese consulate, to which privileges of the club are extended.

If one sees enough of the members, one begins to see a certain resemblance among them that amounts, even, to a family characteristic. There's a certain unmistakable TCC type that, like a pair of galoshes, maintains its essential character from one era to the next. For one thing, he dresses badly. After playing tennis at the club one Sunday afternoon, I found an old liver-spotted gentleman lounging about in the most flagrant example of Go To Hell pants I've ever seen, a baggy plaid of olive green and cranberry red topped off with a fraying tweed sportcoat. His female counterpart, however, is much tidier, generally attired in a skirt suit from Talbots, pumps, and, for a touch of splendor, gold clip-on earrings. But besides a disregard for the basic standards of dress, the typical member also possesses a ruddy complexion from so much time spent outdoors; an accent that begins as the basic preppie honk and ripens over the years into a hoarse blast one might better expect from a Maine lobsterman; and, in the male at least, a distaste for formal occasions when he can't wear his Weejuns. The club discovered this not long ago when it attempted to enliven things by providing formal

candlelight dinners in the Men's Grill to the strains of piano music. It didn't take; nobody showed up.

For all his rough manners, however, the standard clubman does display a kind of grace. One can see it in the tennis player out on the courts, his smooth strokes reflecting years of lessons from the club pro. When he misses, the member does not scream. He mutters a quiet rebuke to himself and then waves his racket through the air in a pantomime of the way he *should* have made the shot. Probing a little deeper into the clubman's psyche, one hits upon a flinty nature that requires only the basics of life — food, drink, and sports, essentially — and that expects to pay rock-bottom prices for them. Of all the things about the club, the most impressive is how inexpensive it is: only \$2,300 a year tops for something the average Texan would think nothing of shelling out ten grand for, with all court costs and greens fees included. Whenever the price is hiked, a mass of outraged resignations follows. When a few of the trendier members noticed the club was getting shabby, a plan surfaced to upgrade the facilities. It was greeted with hostility by most of the membership. "Thank God that plan was modified," exclaimed one Country Club golfer and former member of the admissions committee. "You know what the planners said they wanted? They wanted understated elegance. My God! They said they meant a Cadillac instead of a Rolls-Royce. Well, forget that. For my money I want Oldsmobile."

**T**HE ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE picks new members because they seem "normal." They test for this quality in the admissions process by making sure that the prospective member is universally appealing. Two sponsors within the club have to back him and five more have to write letters in support before his name goes up on the bulletin board for at least a month, during which time the entire membership weighs his character. The admissions committee then ponders the evidence. To be certain that the new member can be quickly woven into the Country Club fabric, the committeemen check to see that the sponsors are his social friends, not professional acquaintances. "Have you been to his house?" is often their first question. And they note whether the supporting letters begin "I have been asked to write . . ." or the far more satisfactory "I would like to write . . ." Then they check him out at cocktails or dinner and submit their recommendation to the Board of Governors. "I sometimes think we're all just a bunch of dogs sniffing each other," says one former committee member in a moment of most un-TCC candor. While a blue bloodline and a prep school-Ivy League background certainly sweeten the scent, the strongest candidates are the ones who are already fully in the fold. When I asked one TCC member if he had been nervous at his admissions committee cocktails, he said he had no reason to be. He'd known everyone in the room his entire life.

Because of their combination of wealth and free time, doctors seem to comprise the strongest contingent at the club — making it, as one member observes, "a great place to get sick." But lawyers and bankers follow closely behind. Gerald Church's brother Dick, owner of three Boston-area sports clubs, figures that he is almost the only representative of any retail trade at TCC. And although many members may have

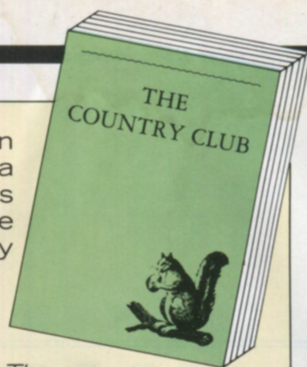


made fortunes by investing the family money in such high-technology companies as Digital, officers of the high-tech companies themselves are by and large absent. Possibly because they are the engines of fame, a highly dubious commodity at The Country Club, the mass media go sorely underrepresented at the club: William O. Taylor of the *Globe*, Rob Trowbridge of *Yankee*, and John Spooner, the author who doubles as a stockbroker, make the list. In one story making the rounds of the club, there was a prospective member who had gone to prep school, was athletic, and would have been a natural except that, as one member explained, he belonged to the "electronics media," which immediately raised the eyebrows of the admissions committee. Then he was quoted in Norma Nathan's column in *The Boston Herald* speaking all too openly about his candidacy. The admissions committee did not appreciate his public ruminations, so the story goes. They banished him to the waiting list.

As at grandmother's house, or any ancestral mansion, everyone is always on his best behavior at The Country Club. This may be because of the presence of women, which has always had a restraining effect on Boston men. "Outwardly, women are excluded," says one member, "but they run the show. If the wife of an admissions committee member says, 'That bitch wore slacks to the Chestnut Hill mall,' she'll never get in the place."

But more likely it is the sense of history that slows members down. Tradition hangs so heavily on the club that it has crushed the present entirely. In the club's *Centennial History*, the years roll by as smoothly and uneventfully as a bowling ball on the green. The only event of any historical note that has ever occurred on the club's grounds was the time Francis Ouimet, a twenty-year-old club caddy from Clyde Street, astonished the golf world by coming to the club and winning the 1913 U.S. Open. For years he had been collecting stray golf balls and trading them back to the clubmen for golf clubs. He'd practiced every morning from dawn until the groundskeeper chased him off. After some warmup tournaments around Boston, he entered the Open and then, when he

**T**HE **Green Book** in hand, we called a number of members to find out what they like best about The Country Club. Here are their responses:



**William O. Taylor**, chairman of the board and publisher, *The Boston Globe*: "I'm sorry. I don't want to be quoted or interviewed. But thank you for calling."



**Eliot Wadsworth II**, owner, White Flower Farm: "Good God, what a question. I hardly even go there. It's got a beautiful golf course, but I don't play golf. I go over and play tennis and swim every once in a while. Sorry I couldn't be more helpful."

**Elliot L. Richardson**, nonresident member: "I haven't been there a lot. The only use of it that my wife and I have made is playing tennis there in Boston."



**William F. Weld**, U.S. Attorney, District of Massachusetts: "The Country Club? The Country Club. Say more. Hang on one sec. I'm trying to feed five kids. Can I call you tomorrow?"

**Frederick McGeorge Bundy**, famous uncle: "Well, I think I haven't got time to talk to you about that."



**Rob Trowbridge**, publisher, *Yankee* magazine: "I must say that I grew up in Brookline. For years and years it represented pure fun. I'd go play hockey there. If I played golf I'd play there. I'm not terribly active now. I'm a nonresident member. For many people it's a constant in their lives."

**Graham Gund**, architect: "What I like best about The Country Club? Playing tennis there on a nice summer evening and eating outside on the terrace. They have a terrace outside which is very pleasant. That's it? That's all you want to know?"

finished in a three-way tie for first, survived a heart-stopping playoff against two of the world's most acclaimed golfers, Harry Vardon and Edward Ray. In the Men's Grill there's a photograph of the three of them, the victorious Ouimet standing between the older men and looking like a street urchin in his wrinkled coat and skimpy knickers. The Executive Committee acknowledged his triumph by allowing him to use the course for free the next year. Ultimately, they made him an honorary member, a privilege ordinarily reserved only for Episcopal bishops. To honor Ouimet's victory, the club invited the Open back for the fiftieth anniversary in 1963 and will have it again on the seventy-fifth in 1988. The clubmen are already distressed about the upcoming event, since it means that not only will television cameras intrude on their privacy, but their course will be taken from them for one week that June. As Courtney Whitin, a dedicated TCC golfer, told me, "That's the sort of thing we don't particularly need."

**A**T THE COUNTRY CLUB, one sees the last vestiges of the essential Bostonian spirit at work, a spirit that emphasizes regularity, order, tradition. After all, the club was founded two years before the Boston Irish elected Hugh

O'Brien to be mayor, breaking a steady reign of Yankee domination. The rabble may have taken our city, but we have our Country Club. And the clubmen enjoy it, feeling a special ease at the place that others might find only in the comfort of their own homes. Member John Winthrop Sears is a former Boston city councilor and Metropolitan District commissioner who won the Republican nomination for governor in 1982 but lost to Michael Dukakis. "I think everybody needs a sanctuary here and there," Sears told me. "The Country Club is that for me. At that old club, there's a sense of peace under those big trees. Anyone with any sensibility feels it. Whenever I come I offer thanks to the great spirit and I remember how lucky I am to play golf here."

*John Sedgwick is the author of the forthcoming Rich Kids, to be published by William Morrow in August.*