

## More Franklin Park Stories

By Debby Rabold

Franklin Park Borough Historian

### How a Texan's Love of Golf Helped Create Franklin Park

Robert Dedman of Dallas, Texas died in 2002, aged seventy-six. The passing of this businessman and philanthropist was the subject of a lengthily **New York Times** obituary since he was the founder and chairman of ClubCorp International and consistently named to the Forbes List of the 400 wealthiest individuals. What did a Texas billionaire have to do with Franklin Park? The answer is more than one could ever imagine.

Robert Dedman's goal in life was to escape the poverty he knew all too well from his Arkansas childhood. After winning a college scholarship, he went on to earn four degrees in economics and engineering and two in law. Having served as general counsel to Texas oil tycoon H. L. Hunt, Dedman was a practicing attorney when in 1957, he founded ClubCorp International and would in time either own or operate 210 golf courses, country clubs, business clubs and resorts worldwide, including North Carolina's famous Pinehurst Club.

On 1 October 1960, the **Pittsburgh Press** reported that a thirty-five year old Dallas attorney had announced the acquisition of 800 acres in Franklin, Ohio, McCandless and Ross townships on which 1,200 homes, a country club, shopping / civic center and industrial park were to be built, with plans to obtain options on an additional 1,300 acres. Ultimately, 5,000 homes were to be part of the Field Club Estates, a \$100 million residential country club community roughly three times the size of Sewickley Borough. Homes were projected to be in the \$20,000 - \$70,000 price range, pricey at the time.

The new community's centerpiece was to be a country club in which all homeowners would be members. Dedman had already established seven other such communities before announcing plans for the Field Club Estates, which was to be developed by his North Hills Field Club, Inc.

The goal was to make country club living affordable so that more members could join, thus increasing profitability. Three separate golf courses were to be built around one clubhouse along with four swimming pools, tennis courts, bowling lanes, ski runs, bridle paths, exercise room, teenage room and dining rooms. A pre-construction charter lifetime membership cost \$1,350. Given that women's rights and civil rights were still unknown in 1960, the club's attitude toward female golfers is not surprising. The planned eighteen hole course was to be used exclusively by men while women would only be permitted to play on a nine hole course that could also be used for mixed play.

It is not known how Dedman settled on the Franklin township location for this venture. What is known is that members of the Pittsburgh Pirates baseball franchise were heavily involved. The Field Club's Board of Governors was headed by Pittsburgh mayor Joseph Barr and included Pirate manager Joe Brown, captain Dick Groat, pitcher Elroy Face and longtime announcer Bob Prince. Ken Roswell, son of Pirate personality Rosy Roswell, was named the club's general manager. [It is interesting to note that in the 1940s, Pittsburgh papers reported on the rumor that singer Bing Crosby might be looking for a home in Franklin Township to be near his beloved Pirates of which he was part owner.]

The 15 February 1961 **News Record** reported how the Field Club with its 300 members at the time, "extricated itself from a financial quagmire" by selling property to King's Ridge, Inc. Broadlawn Highlands Corporation, which developed Mount Lebanon's Virginia Manor, bought 400 lots for its Brook Park subdivision. Another 150 lots were also sold as well as a parcel that went to the Pittsburgh Presbytery.

As land was bought and sold, Joseph Barr turned the first spade of dirt at the club's April 1 groundbreaking. That summer, Ross Builders opened five model homes in the new Field Club Estates and three pools opened July fourth.

*You can find a fuller richer life as a resident of Field Club Estates. To live here, to realize the beauty and the pleasures of country club living... this may well be the accomplishment of a lifetime!*

**[Pittsburgh Press 30 July 1961]**

Behind the hoopla and promises of a pampered lifestyle, brewed a controversy that would soon bring about Franklin Township's transformation into Franklin Park Borough.

The township's planning commission carefully controlled population growth by requiring minimum half acre residential lots, which was not popular with home builders. Carroll Hill Associates was preparing not only a master plan for township supervisors, but also a plan for what was to be called King Ridge Borough. The new borough was to consist of smaller lots in the new country club community. As a second class township, Franklin could not prevent any part of its self from seceding or prevent annexation by a borough or first class township. Local officials would have been powerless to prevent King Ridge Borough from seceding then annexing the remainder of the township, which would have meant the end of the 137 year old community.

It was when King Ridge plans were mistakenly sent to township officials that the plot was discovered and concerned residents sprang into action. Petitions were signed, hearings were held and in August 1961, the county court granted borough status to the newly named Franklin Park. [A year earlier, neighboring Sewickley Township (Bell Acres) was granted borough status when adjoining Sewickley Heights Borough wanted to annex portions of that community.]

Financial problems plagued the country club. The project faced sheriff's sale in the fall of 1962, by which time construction of the clubhouse began under the direction of a new general manager. The following summer, the renamed Royal Ridge Field Club was advertising nine holes of golf, three pools and an Arizona-California style clubhouse. Ownership again changed in 1968 and 1976 when three groups, including the Royal Order of the Moose, divided the property. Throughout this time, Ryan Homes was building in the Field Club Estates.

*In Field Club Estates, Ryan homes are within walking distance of the Royal Ridge Field Club. Here you'll find a handsome golf course, a putting green to sharpen your game, an elegant swimming pool and a complete program of winter sports, dances and parties. There's even a special pool with supervised instruction for youngsters.*

**[Pittsburgh Press 5 May 1966]**

As financial problems continued, First Seneca Bank took ownership. At one point, the borough considered buying the clubhouse and pool for community use, but the \$2 million price tag and needed upgrades were prohibitive.

In 1983, Ryan Homes approached the borough's planning commission to ask that a portion of the Moose's 302 acres along Arndt and Reis Run roads be rezoned to allow multi-family dwellings. Plans were to build the company's largest subdivision in Western Pennsylvania that would consist mostly of 1,000 townhomes and apartments, which when completed would have doubled the borough's population on just 3% of its land.

Public reaction was swift and predictable. Within days, petitions against the rezoning bid were signed by 652 residents or ten percent of the population. One unexpected result was how their mutual opposition to the proposed project brought together longtime and newer residents in a way not often seen. The meeting room was filled to capacity for the August 1983 Planning Commission hearing with an overflow crowd listening to proceedings over loudspeakers that had been set up in the parking lot. About 250 residents showed up that summer evening to voice opposition to the Ryan plan. Borough officials were quick to realize how outdated and inadequate their zoning ordinances had become and imposed a freeze on all development until ordinances could be reviewed. Ryan Homes filed suit in

Common Pleas Court. In the end, single family homes were built in the Hunting Creek and Franklin Ridge subdivisions along Arndt and Reis Run roads.

Robert Dedman's vision of a country club community in the North Hills never materialized. Faced with ongoing financial problems, the clubhouse, pools and golf course survived under various owners until disbanded and the property converted into housing. Only a portion of the original golf course remains as part of Franklin Park's Clover Hill Golf Course. Without doubt, the most significant impact this project had on the community was its role in the creation of Franklin Park Borough.