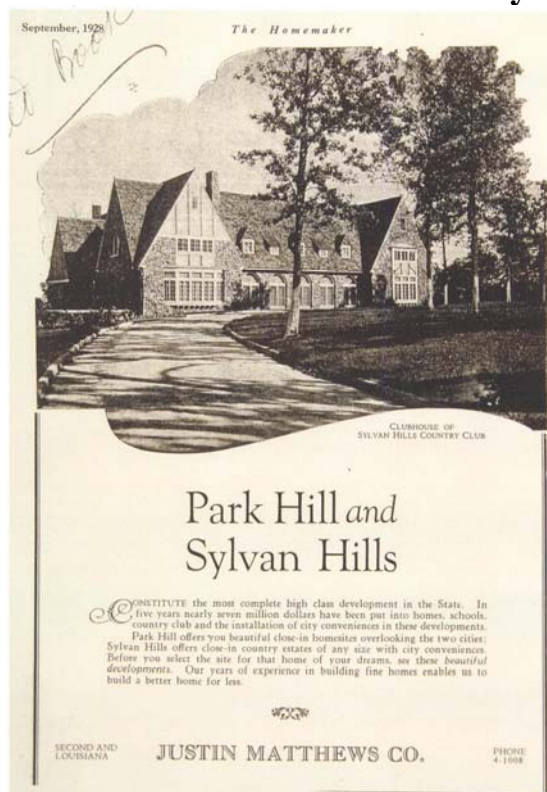


**Sandwiching in History**  
**Sylvan Hills Country Club Golf Course**  
**7400 Hwy. 107, Sherwood**  
**July 8, 2011**  
**By: Rachel Silva**



## Intro

Hi, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the Sandwiching in History tour of the Sylvan Hills Country Club Golf Course! Before we get started, I'd like to thank a few folks for their help with the tour—longtime Sherwood alderwoman Becki Vassar (recently retired); Amy Jackson, Event & Facility Coordinator for the City of Sherwood; and Sonny Janssen, Director of Parks & Recreation for the City of Sherwood.

The Sylvan Hills Country Club Golf Course was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2010 for its association with the development of entertainment and recreation in the Sylvan Hills community and later, the City of Sherwood.

**Justin Matthews, Sr.**

Forward-thinking **businessman Justin Matthews, Sr.**, shaped much of the residential character of present-day NLR and Sherwood when he developed Park Hill, Lakewood, and Sylvan Hills. Justin Matthews was born in 1876 near Monticello, AR, and moved to Little Rock in 1901 (the same year he married Agnes Somers). He made a fortune in the cotton seed oil industry around the turn of the century (he owned **Rose City Cotton Oil**), which enabled him to invest heavily in real estate. He bought land about 2 miles north of downtown Little Rock and just beyond the northern boundary of North Little Rock.

Matthews spearheaded the plan to create **improvement districts in North Little Rock** to fund the **paving of city streets, a sewer and drainage system (1913-14)**, and the **construction of the Broadway Bridge (1922)** over the Arkansas River. Matthews also had the Main Street viaduct over the railroad yard between 8<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Streets rebuilt to handle increased traffic (1927). These public improvements played an instrumental role in the growth of NLR by making it easily accessible and more desirable, but they also helped Matthews develop his own land north of the river. It was no accident that the **Arkansas-Missouri Highway** (which was also called the Sylvan Hills Hwy., Hwy. 5 (by the 1940s), Hwy. 107, and JFK Blvd.) was one of the first paving projects undertaken by the state's first highway commission. Matthews was appointed to the commission in 1927, and the highway just happened to be the main thoroughfare through his land.

**Park Hill** was the **first suburban development in North Little Rock**. Matthews platted the first sections of Park Hill in 1921 and created the **Park Hill Land Company** to market, sell, and develop the area. At its peak, the Park Hill Land Co. **employed over 200 people**, including an **architect/builder, brick mason, horticulturist/landscape artist, and road construction engineer**.

Also in the 1920s, Matthews organized the Justin Matthews Company to oversee the development of Park Hill and Sylvan Hills. In 1931 he formed the Lakewood Development Company to construct the 6 lakes and dams after which the subdivision was named.

While Park Hill experienced significant development in the 1920s, Lakewood did not develop until after WWII...with the exception of the Old Mill. Recognizing that the Great Depression would negatively impact his lot sales in Lakewood, Justin Matthews temporarily held off on residential development and between 1931 and 1933 built the Old Mill as both a tourist attraction and to pay homage to Arkansas's pioneer heritage (namely his friend and mentor, T. R. Pugh). The picturesque setting around the Old Mill and the wonderful collection of "faux bois"

sculptures by Mexican artist Dionicio Rodriguez made the area a popular hangout. In the mid-1940s when Lakewood began to develop, the Old Mill and other public use areas made it a desirable place to live and lots sold quickly.

### **Back to Sylvan Hills...**

Present-day Sherwood began as a small community called Sylvan Hills. The area was very sparsely populated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Early settlers John and Annabelle Lea reported an abundance of wildlife, including deer, squirrels, bears, turkeys, wolves, and wildcats. Their log cabin would have been located NE of the golf course near Powell Drive (no longer extant). [Lee Ave. named after them, but spelling changed. Lea Cemetery in the middle of town was their family cemetery.]

Julius and Pauline Koehler moved to what is now SW Sherwood in 1912 and with the help of some of their adult children, they started Koehler Dairy in 1923. Just to illustrate the remoteness of the area at that time, to get to Koehler Dairy, you had to turn at Central (which is now Country Club Rd.) and then turn right at a big white oak tree with a “K” on it. After a better road was built to the dairy, they would tell people not to turn at the tree but to go down further and turn on the “fairway.” This is how Fairway Ave. got its name. In 1943 the dairy was purchased by John and Mary Wirges.

Justin Matthews designed and built the Sylvan Hills Golf Course in 1927 to provide upscale recreational opportunities for the residents of Park Hill. Of course, Matthews also envisioned residential development around the golf course in Sylvan Hills. A September 1928 advertisement in *The Homemaker* magazine read,

“Park Hill and Sylvan Hills constitute the most complete high class development in the State. In five years nearly seven million dollars have been put into homes, schools, country club and the installation of city conveniences in these developments. Park Hill offers you beautiful close-in homesites overlooking the two cities; Sylvan Hills offers close-in country estates of any size with city conveniences. Before you select the site for that home of your dreams, see these *beautiful developments*.”

### ***History of Golf & Construction of Sylvan Hills Course***

The sport of golf gained popularity in the northeastern U.S. in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and gradually spread across the country by 1920. In 1915 the Arkansas State Golf

Association was established, and representatives from 7 country clubs with golf courses attended the first meeting, including the Little Rock, Pine Bluff, Jonesboro, Hot Springs, Texarkana, Fort Smith, and Helena country clubs.

It is interesting to note that Little Rock banker Joseph E. England was the first president of the AR State Golf Association, and Mr. England was also one of Justin Matthews's business associates, co-owning some of the property in Park Hill. Mr. England's daughter was married to Justin Matthews, Jr., and Mr. England built one of the original 16 houses in the exclusive Edgemont development on Skyline Drive in Park Hill (16 grand-scale homes built there before the Depression). So...this relationship between Justin Matthews, Sr., and Joseph England probably had something to do with the construction of the country club and golf course in Sylvan Hills. And long before "golf communities" became popular in the 1970s, visionary Justin Matthews conceived the idea of using a golf course as a catalyst for residential development.

Justin Matthews and his wife, Agnes, transferred ownership of the Sylvan Hills Country Club to the Sylvan Hills Improvement Corporation, who then solicited real estate bonds to pay for the club's mortgage. The 1927 advertisement for investment described the club as consisting of a "120-acre plot of ground and a magnificent field stone clubhouse and swimming pool, four other buildings, and an 18-hole golf course which has been pronounced one of the finest in the state. The clubhouse is beautifully furnished and has steam heat." As you can see from this ad and the one before it, the original clubhouse was a beautiful, 2-story, English Revival-style building with the pool right out behind it.

The Matthews Company built a few houses in the late 1920s south of the golf course on Country Club Rd. (then called Central), and at least 2 of them are still extant (405 & 605 Country Club). But the Depression hit and stalled residential development in Sylvan Hills. [There are still a few other homes from the 1920s and 30s on Country Club, Koehler, and Claremont today.]

The country club operated successfully until the early 1930s, when the Depression forced the sale of the property to a group of executives who operated it as a nightclub. This was a rough time period for golf courses throughout the U.S. because when people had less disposable income, they cut out recreational opportunities, especially golf. Then another devastating event happened...on January 3, 1935, the 1927 clubhouse building was destroyed by fire. During the latter years of the Depression and WWII, the club ceased to exist as such. Older members recalled seeing cows grazing on the fairways, and Lester Kersey

specifically remembered herding the milk cows from Salyer's Dairy on East Lee Avenue to graze on the golf course during the summer of 1936. During the war years, 1941-45, Mr. R. J. Ratcliff operated a quail and bird hunting operation on the golf course land.

But the post-war years turned out to be full of change for the golf course and the surrounding area.

### **Sherwood Incorporates**

A group of the original club members, returning as war veterans, reorganized the club and repurchased the land. A new clubhouse was constructed ca. 1946 using the original fieldstone foundation, but it was a one-story building instead of the original 2 stories. And the golf course was rehabilitated following years of neglect.

But money was still tight after WWII, and the country club management resorted to a controversial method of generating financial support—slot machines. Country club members paid an expensive initial joining fee, but there were no monthly dues. The slot machines quietly generated enough income to cover expenses and also create a little profit. This practice worked for years, but trouble began when Governor Sid McMath took action to clean up illegal gambling in Hot Springs and other areas of the state. With a tip that the Club was to be raided, a few individuals took the slot machines to a wooded area in the middle of the golf course and buried them. The machines were discovered and confiscated. A couple of machines remained in the club basement until the second clubhouse fire in 1961. Firefighters broke the remaining machines and with newspaper coverage of their existence, the use of gambling at North Hills to generate revenue was stopped and the “gamblers” of the Club were back to golf and cards.

[\*\*NR nomination says it was Gov. Win Rockefeller who raided the club, but he didn't become governor until 1967-1971. So the dates don't jive. On the other hand, it is likely that Sid McMath (Gov. of AR, 1949-1953) tried to stop illegal gambling during his term as well because he was from Hot Springs and helped oust longtime H.S. Mayor Leo McLaughlin, who relied on election fraud and illegal gambling to control the Spa City...]

In late 1947, a group of area residents met at the home of Dennis Duran to discuss forming some sort of civic club. They advertised a public meeting to be held on January 2, 1948, in the Wright Grocery Store at the corner of Oak Hill & Country Club (later Oak Hill Grocery, run by Dee Jay and Jackie Hudson family). 70 men

attended the meeting and officers were elected. The men invited representatives from Cammack Village (which incorporated in 1943) to speak about the incorporation process. Sherwood officially incorporated on April 22, 1948. But the new town had no budget, so two area home demonstration clubs organized the first Miss Sherwood Contest to raise money. The women collected a penny per vote and raised \$525, and on the night of the coronation, a Bingo game and the sale of drinks raised another \$75. They gave a total of \$600 to the town council. The council immediately discussed issues like garbage collection, insect control, public bus transportation, vaccinating and tagging dogs, oiling streets, law enforcement, and obtaining natural gas (to replace butane).

In July 1948 the council purchased a 16' x 16' surplus building from Camp Robinson for less than \$100 to serve as the first city hall. It was located where Delmont Park is today (Delmont & Sherwood; also called Triangle Park historically). That same month, Sherwood passed Traffic Ordinance No. 1, which mandated a 25 mph speed limit throughout the entire town. According to a special census in September 1948, Sherwood had 714 people; all white. [This is interesting, considering that Sherwood now has a population of about 30,000 people and is the 14<sup>th</sup> largest city in AR.]

Beginning in July 1950, Metropolitan Trust Company (operated by successors of Justin Matthews, Sr.) started selling residential lots along the golf course to the Sylvan Hills Development Corporation. Little Rock Air Force Base in Jacksonville became operational in 1955, creating an increased demand for housing as hundreds of new people moved to the area. Sherwood grew and so did the country club. In 1956 the club's name was changed from "Sylvan Hills Country Club" to "North Hills Country Club." However, catastrophe struck again on May 15, 1961, when the second clubhouse burned (maybe due to sparks from a large fireplace in the building).

### ***"Modern" Clubhouse***

Undaunted, Club President G. M. Rozzell planned to rebuild. With insurance money, the Club constructed a "Teen Building" immediately behind the swimming pool. The Club operated out of this smaller building while the new "modern" clubhouse, designed by NLR architect Raymond Branton, was under construction. N. P. Alessi, Inc., was contracted to construct the building, while A. C. Ballentine was construction superintendent. Construction began in October 1962, and the building was completed in December 1963. The new clubhouse cost about \$300,000, and approximately \$100,000 was in the roof construction alone.

Photo of current clubhouse—good example of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Modern architecture or “Googie” style—irregular or geometric shapes; futuristic design; use of glass, steel, concrete, or neon. [Googie term comes from a Modern design used on a coffee shop called Googies in Los Angeles. The term was used to describe the style in a 1952 *House and Home* article.]

### **Robert Trent Jones, Sr.**

By the late 1970s, the 1920s course could no longer sustain the tremendous golfing activity at the Club. In 1977 Robert Trent Jones, Sr., known as one of the leading golf course architects in the world, was contacted to redesign the North Hills course. The original greens did not drain well, and the back 9 holes to the north played against the contour of the land. Jones fixed this by rebuilding the existing greens from the base up to the playing surface with new sand traps and tee boxes. The most extensive work was planned for the north nine holes, which were slightly reconfigured, and a completely automated sprinkler system was installed throughout the course. The total cost of the project was to be approximately \$800,000. North Hills CC Golf Course is the only Robert Trent Jones-designed course in AR.

### **Recent History**

The Country Club experienced ups and downs throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, but it closed in May 2007. An offer was made to purchase the property for development as a residential neighborhood, which prompted many Sherwood residents to fight for the preservation of the golf course. In July 2008 the City of Sherwood settled all claims against the property and purchased it for the city. The Greens and North Hills is currently a public course operated by the City of Sherwood, and the clubhouse (which is now named after Mrs. Becki Vassar) is available for special events and meetings. Although the property’s overall appearance has changed over the years, the golf course encompasses roughly the same land area and has the same basic layout as it did in 1927. It is an important piece of Sherwood’s history.

Maybe tell story about people being “sprinkled” on the golf course—this was brought up when someone wanted to subdivide the golf course—that it was sacred ground...

### **Interior Details**

- State-of-the-art building when it was constructed—said to be “tornado proof” if you got on the lower level.
- The huge swimming pool behind the clubhouse was the second pool on that site (built 1964-65) and was filled in after the city bought the property in 2008 because of safety & maintenance concerns.
- Railing around the balcony—the circular pattern was added later to make the railing taller.
- The floor in this upstairs room was parquet like the dance floor, but was covered with carpet to help with acoustics.
- Black drop lighting over the dance floor is not original.
- Upstairs entry way has the original tile floor under the carpet.
- Upstairs bar is original.
- Original kitchen area behind upstairs bar—was full kitchen, but equipment has been removed and it is now a caterer’s kitchen.
- Downstairs: Not original floor, columns, bar, or stained glass.
- The pro shop used to be on the opposite side of the downstairs.
- The room behind the bar was originally the men’s locker room and card room.
- A women’s card room and smaller locker room is further down the hall.
- Another room for baggage/golf clubs down that hall.

### **Extras:**

The Old Mill was built to look like an abandoned grist mill (the Old Mill was never actually used as a mill, although some historic mill components from Cagle’s mill in Pope County are located inside the mill building).

Sherwood’s first fire station was completed in September 1951, providing better fire protection and lowering insurance rates. In 1966 Sherwood got its own U.S. Post Office (located near corner of North Hills & Hwy. 107; prior to this, mail was delivered by Park Hill carriers). And in the mid-1990s, Sherwood got its own zip code (72120).

Sherwood has accepted many annexations over the years. The city has always had a close relationship with Metropolitan Trust Co. (who owned much of the land that is now Sherwood). Metropolitan Trust Co. would develop land and the residents would petition for its annexation into Sherwood.