



Churned out in 1930, sheet music capitalized on miniature golf's overnight rise to popularity.

By Constance Bond

We couldn't stop playing to save our soles

Miniature golf began as a craze, but over the decades it has gently seduced Americans and become part of our collective identity

The year was 1930 and the fad sweeping the country was miniature golf. It bears mentioning that a fad at the end of the Roaring Twenties was more than just dinner-table conversation. American society was in an addictive mood, and this was the decade that had spawned dance marathons, flagpole sitting and the Ouija-board mania—all increasingly frantic reactions to the times. Coming as it did the year after the Great Crash, miniature golf was the grand finale.

And the perfect palliative, then as now. As the problems of ordinary life mushroom out of manageable proportions, here is a place where everything is brought down to less-than-size: not just the putter you swing and the length of the greens, but also landmarks from throughout the world—seated Buddhas with tunnels drilled through their kneecaps, recumbent sphinxes with passages between their paws, castles fronted by drawbridged moats and, nearly always, that infernal whirring windmill with the trick vanes.

An unobtrusive—if seedy—presence

After peaking in 1930, the game bottomed out like the rest of the economy, and except for a revival during the '50s (spurred by the growth of the suburbs) it never really made a comeback. Rather, through the years the little links maintained an unobtrusive and homey—if occasionally seedy—presence as a dense architectural landscape developed around them. But people always kept coming by. After all, what better activity can there be on a warm summer evening for teenagers on a first date, or for a family doing the *Father Knows Best* routine?

Now we have a book that memorializes, in pictures and in words, this ubiquitous American pastime. *Miniature Golf*, available this summer from Abbeville Press, presents the photographs of John Margolies, who traveled the country to document as many miniature courses as he could find. The text, by Nina Garfinkel and Maria Reidelbach, answers the question we occasionally asked as we drove off for hamburgers and shakes: Who dreamed up this game anyway?

It was James Barber, the owner of a country estate in Pinehurst, North Carolina, who came up with the idea. In 1916, just for fun, he laid out a small course in his garden, a pleasant diversion for houseguests.

It took a decade for the game to be exploited by a pair of high-rolling promoters, who built a pocket course on the roof of a skyscraper in New York City's financial district. They hoped to attract statistic-frazzled Wall Street types during their lunch hours.

Their small business was a hit, but a technological problem stood in the way of expansion: the course needed a surface that could stand up to the abuse of countless shuffling feet, caroming balls, and enraged

Color photographs by John Margolies/Esto

whacks from the business end of a putter. The solution lay with an Englishman in Mexico, the owner of a cotton plantation. Four years earlier, he had perfected and then patented a compact cottonseed-hull surface. Now all he needed was a market.

It was time to cut some deals. First, the New Yorkers wrote a check to the Englishman, and the number of cottonseed-paved rooftop minicourses grew to 150. Then Garnet Carter, part owner of a resort in Georgia, got into the act. His wife had designed a "Tom Thumb" course; when everybody wanted to play, Carter sensed a winner. After buying rights to use the cottonseed-hull process for \$65,000, he located a company to manufacture hollow logs, tiny houses and other miniature-golf hazards and the courses were sold nationwide.

The game sprung up almost overnight

By 1930, there were 3,000 Tom Thumb links and more than 20,000 other Mom-and-Pop operations—almost overnight, the game was everywhere. Its success was so great that Hollywood studios, with movie attendance down nearly 25 percent, ordered their stars not to set foot on the competition's turf.

There was, of course, no way the momentum could have lasted; for one thing, we would have run out of vacant lots long ago. Yet the fall was fast, even for a fad. Not only Hollywood, but local residents who didn't like the noise of late-night players, and finally Will Rogers ("There is millions got a 'putter' in their hand when they ought to have a shovel") turned against the game. Seems as though only one person knew the score: in October 1930, when miniature golf still looked like an industry analyst's dream, Garnet Carter sold his Tom Thumb manufacturing business at a very tidy profit.

Authors Garfinkel and Reidelbach love their subject, and they describe the history of miniature golf with fond exuberance, driving home every imaginable pun. For them, the game is an American art form. "Europe may have its centuries-old traditions of landscape architecture," they proclaim, "but America has miniature golf." Well.

The fact that almost all of us have played the game, the authors argue, qualifies miniature golf as part of the collective consciousness of America. They may have a point—try asking a European if he can hit a ball so that it passes between the vanes of a turning windmill. It would be a great line in one of those old war movies, where the German spy with the flawless Midwestern accent is posing as an American G.I. "Ever manage to hit a ball through the windmill vanes?" a savvy fellow soldier from Detroit casually asks him. And caught unaware, the imposter answers, "Nope, never even been to Holland." Bingo.



Lampoon of drawing-room mayhem appeared in *Judge* at height of miniature golf's popularity in 1930.



The first miniature golf course, 1916, was laid out in the private garden of a North Carolina estate.