



Dorothy Brown Interview Transcript  
Speaking on behalf of Violet Pooley-Sweeny

BEV: Can you talk about what it would have been like to be a woman athlete at the time that Violet started golfing?

DOROTHY: In the years when Violet began golfing as a child she she began as a very small child, she was only 8 years old when she actually began golfing, and had to kind of play and practice in secret, as it were, because the members of the golf club that her father belonged to would not have approved of a young child, especially a girl child playing golf and and I think that that probably says it it all. It was only when she showed her exceptional prowess which she showed as a very young child, she was about ten actually, that then they began to say ok well we can overlook the fact you're a girl, you're going to be a good golfer, now we'll take an interest in you.

And and I think that uh when you think of that as a social context in which she began her career her determination to succeed is all the more remarkable because at that time before the turn of the century, before the turn of the 20th century, it just was not a considered thing amongst finely bred young women, that was not what you did, make an exhibition of herself and Violet set out to do that from a very young age.

BEV: Where did Violet's inspiration to play golf come from?

DOROTHY: Violet's inspiration to play golf definitely came from her father. Her father first came to BC as a prospector and a miner, so I think we can make a fair assumption that he was probably an adventuresome sort of fellow and Violet would grow up in that environment. He was one of the founding members of the Victoria Golf Club. They lived in Victoria very close to the golf club and he became an avid golfer, so obviously like all young girls wanting to be like their dad, Violet learned to play golf because of her father.

BEV: Did he coach her?

DOROTHY: No, not in the beginning because once again she was a girl. Probably, it wasn't necessarily that golf wasn't a seemly sport for women because women had played golf from very



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early times, but perhaps within their family dynamic it worked, Violet at that young age probably didn't think that you know she would be allowed to play golf unless she became good, so she practiced on her own to begin with. She caddied for her father, whether she actually caddied when she was 8 years old or not is not known, but she did in later years definitely caddy for her father.

BEV: Do you know anything about her relationship with her father?

DOROTHY: No other than that I believe her mother was not a golfer. I never have found anything to support the evidence that her family, her mother was a golfer, so it was purely her father's influence.

BEV: Can you talk a little about the barriers that Violet would have faced and the things she would have had to do to overcome those barriers?

DOROTHY: Well, to be involved in a sport in the late 1800s and the early 1900s as a woman, and especially living in somewhere like BC which was still considered a fairly remote region then, must have taken a huge amount of drive, focus, of determination because first of all geographically you were isolated from a fairly large portion of the rest of the country and the world in particular, and we know that quite early on in her career Violet did make a trip overseas to compete so I think just when you think about the logistics of doing that even the logistics of competing in the Pacific Northwest, as we know it to arrange to go and play into Comer, Portland, or Seattle wasn't quite as easy then as it is now, so it must have taken huge amounts of determination

BEV: Would she have made those trips on her own?

DOROTHY: Well, that's something... To know whether Violet traveled on her own or whether she would have traveled with another member of her family, we actually don't know that. That's only something that we can you know kind of posit a guess at. We do know that when she would play the Pacific Northwest Golf Association Championship was considered a social highlight of the year. It lasted for about ten or twelve days. It was quite... I don't know what other context, perhaps it was kind of like almost a mini World Cup of soccer that we would have.



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It was a huge huge thing so there was lots of parties, lots of socializing, as well as the competition. And I suspect like most young girls she certainly wouldn't have wanted her parents around if she was participating, but we have no true evidence as to how they traveled. I suspect, reality would suspect, that she certainly would be accompanied by an older individual.

BEV: How many other competitors would there have been?

DOROTHY: Well, perhaps from BC at the time Violet played there might have been two more competitors or three more competitors, but it after the turn of the century sort of after 1909 til the period when the war broke out and then certainly in the late teens and early 20s competition became much stronger, more people were involved so you would have a significant event with perhaps you know a 100 entrants and at that time, but in terms of you know a group of girls traveling together in a buggy, or however they went by, obviously they would go by some other form of transportation, there wouldn't have been all that many.

BEV: What would have the financial struggle have been like?

DOROTHY: Well, Violet came from a somewhat well established family. After her father gave up on the idea of hitting it rich in the gold rush, he became a lawyer, so we have to assume and they certainly were one of the leading lights of Victoria society at that time, so we have to assume for Violet it wouldn't be a struggle. There are other women who would be involved in competitive golf at that time and... perhaps it might have been more of a financial struggle for them.

BEV: Can you talk about the competition that she went on abroad?

DOROTHY: Actually in 1913, so bear in mind the timing of that one, year before the the first world war began, Violet went to Port Rush to play an an Irish Ladies event and she subsequently went over to Britain to play at Scarborough in the British Ladies Open Event, and that was her first foray overseas though her father was English, she'd never been back to England, and she went over there to play in that event and probably if we bear in mind all the uh the events surrounding it, the time period, her lack of experience in international competitive play, uh no special coaches, no psychologists, her that was one of the most outstanding achievements in her career, because she actually played to the fourth round. It was all match play, and she defeated the reigning



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champion, who, Miss Ravenscourt, in that event, and newspaper reports of that event reckon it was one of the finest golf matches that had been seen, to be played.

Now when you hear veritably restrained British newspapers saying that two women played the finest golf match that they've seen, I think that's pretty strong praise for an event, and and certainly Violet considered that herself a highlight of her career.

BEV: Can you talk about some of the constraints that Violet would have had around clothing of the day?

DOROTHY: Well, when you look at any of the images from golf of that time period or any of the women's images certainly, you'll see that generally speaking they played in rather voluminous skirts and they of course would still have been wearing corsets, and that's a restriction right in itself. Even young girls wore corsets. They're shirts that they wore initially were the shirts of the turn of the century with large large what's called leg of mutton sleeves and lots of tucks and frills and bows and and very form-fitted.

Under these voluminous skirts there probably would have had on two or three petticoats and knitted hoes and of course shoes that were small and narrow and pinched your feet enormously, and it a hat was a necessary too because a lady couldn't go out without having uh her head covered. So I just don't even want to think what it would have actually been like to go on the golf course wearing all of these things.

And the next big issue they had to deal with was the fact that it was considered so immodest to reveal any of these petticoats that were under your skirt or anything so when you got into taking a really good golf swing uh and your skirt maybe would hitch up on one side, how did you stop doing that. So, they went in effect using a large garter around the bottom to boost up their skirts from hitching up and revealing these immodest petticoats and also stop it interfering with their you know their play.

BEV: Can you tell me a story about Violet?



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DOROTHY: One of the charming stories that I've heard talking to some of the the women who played in these early years was the about playing in a in a match in the rain, and of course in the one of the favorite forms of attire was a knitted suit so you can only imagine that what happened when the rain came pelting down as it does in British Columbia and the suit got wetter and wetter and the skirt got longer and longer and heavier. So this gutsy, feisty young competitor nipped behind the bush, took her skirt off, completed the round in her slip and then before she could go back into the clubhouse, put the wet skirt back on again to preserve her modesty.

BEV: Did Violet play golf her entire life?

DOROTHY: No, she didn't. Violet stopped playing golf in the mid 1930s. Ahe married in 1915 and and she married a well known Vancouver gentleman who was also a great sportsman. And the two of them had a really really strong belief that amateur golf or amateur sport was how it was done, how it was played.

And so in early, actually in late 1920s Violet had been instrumental in the foundation of the Canadian Ladies Golf Union and then when it was decided that BC would have a branch of that golfing union, Violet opened that branch in 1933 and was it's first president for 13 years. So at that point in her life she decided to give back to the sport by being an admin, by helping in the administration of the sport.

BEV: How was Violet an advocate for women in sport?

DOROTHY: I don't know that you would have said that she was actively aware of of the inequities that women would have faced in a sport such as golf. I think that Violet was a very pragmatic, practical, realistic individual and she went out and did what had to be done.

So the moment that she could change her clothing, as we talked about earlier, from all these large skirts to a straighter skirt, to wear a man's shirt, to wear a tie, to not wear a hat, and most of all to smoke on the golf course whenever she wanted to, she did that exactly, and I think that I sort of from what I've read and what people have told me, she would just get out there and do the job and sort of the consequences were just something you dealt with. And I I feel that certainly she was uh a supporter of the idea that all women should be able to play golf but she just believed that instead of talking about it, you went out there and you did it.

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BEV: What else can you mention about her personality?

DOROTHY: She kept the same golf clubs; her hickory shafted golf clubs, for her whole career. She didn't rush out and buy whatever new technology was available in those days, because she believed that you should make the equipment work for you, not work for the equipment, if you like, so even at, you know, even in the 30s most people would have been switching from wooden shafted clubs to steel shafted clubs.

She didn't, she kept her putter for many many years thereafter, and and she remained, even though she stopped actively playing golf, she remained passionately interested in the sport, kept on top of it, was a great supporter um of of young women playing. In fact the junior women's trophy in BC is called Sweeney trophy, and the cup that which you know it's fitting that it should be named after Violet because she was so passionately keen on the idea of young girls, women playing sports.

BEV: Can you talk about Violet's legacy?

DOROTHY: Well, perhaps a little technical bit of the legacies that Violet would have left behind her is the fact that on par, that wonderful golfing term that everybody uses, when par was established on BC golf courses for women and for men, Violet was the first person to play the course to establish the women's par, so courses that were built in the the 20s, in the teens and the 20s, certainly would have had Violet establish the women's par.

An interesting sidebar to that is that it was actually handicapping came about because of women's participation in golf. It was the women's golf union in Great Britain that decided to make the field more level for men and women and introduced the system of handicapping, not too many people know that.

BEV: Can you talk about some of Violet's accomplishments?

DOROTHY: Well, she was a 7 time Pacific Northwest Golf Association Champion, which in her day and age that was the premier event, certainly in in the Western part of Canada and the United States, huge huge huge event. She won that seven times.



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She was British Columbia Amateur Champion 9 times, a record that held well into the 80s. She played in many Vancouver and city district events and won that many times too. As we've talked about earlier, she went overseas to compete.

She played in the Eastern United States in women's events there, and when you stack that up with all the logistics of even getting to those places I think it's a remarkable achievement. She was called the queen of the Northwest fairways, that was how she was described in the newspapers, and it's true, she she reigned over the fairways.

BEV: Can you think of what Violet might have said to young women?

DOROTHY: If I was to think of something that Violet might have said to the young women today it would have, I'm sure it would have been follow a dream and and do it. When you think about a young girl at the age of eight going out and playing golf under circumstances we can't even begin to imagine, she must have had a dream, she must have had a desire to do it and I'm sure that she would you know be so pleased to see the advances that women have made in the sport, that they are now you know sort of operating on an equal footing in terms of training and support coming to young women. Violet would have been out there cheering for them.

BEV: How do you think Violet would have liked to be remembered?

DOROTHY: I think Violet would probably have liked to have been remembered as Violet was. Just as you know a practical, realistic contributor to a sport that she passionately loved and kind of getting on with the job. And and doing it. There was not much, from everything that I've ever heard or read about Violet or talked to with any, there was not much pretence or side to Violet. She worked hard. In fact, one of the most famous images of Violet taken in her later years shows her wearing an apron with a cigarette in her mouth putting, she obviously wasn't big on what you looked like.

BEV: How have perceptions of women in golf changed over the years?

DOROTHY: I think perhaps the kind of conversely, if you like, to to sort of start with an opposite, as men's game has become more powerful on the golf course, and obviously women have not perhaps been able to match some of the the distances that the men achieve in in hitting the ball.

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The women's game has become more admired because obviously a woman has to use a lot of skill and strategy. It's not just all about sheer physical strength anymore for women, obviously that's a huge factor, and this new emerging group of young women, it's a huge factor for them.

But a woman's game in many ways, I might get thrown off the planet for this, has always been more about finesse and and skill, knowing that the men aren't necessarily have had the strength to achieve the distance, so the public now I think begin to realize that, and it's more comparable to their own games, if you want to watch a woman play golf as oppose to watching some of the new superstars of men playing golf.

BEV: Do you think Violet would have considered herself a feminist?

DOROTHY: It's interesting to think of the position Violet might have taken in the early part of the 20th century when obviously suffrets and the idea of feminism was kind of beginning to be born. I'm not aware of Violet expressing any personal views in in regard to that. She did after all; she was in a very traditional marriage to a very traditional family. She came from a very traditional family. The one kind of non-traditional aspect of of Violet's personality was her desire to succeed in golf, the rest of it I suspect that she was a pretty conventional woman of the time.

So she may inwardly have held some very strong views but outwardly didn't rock the boat. But then when you consider what she did, she worked so hard for women to be able to play golf by establishing the administrative body in BC that you know inside I'm sure she was saying I'm gonna work for them and I'm going to make it work.

BEV: Was golf one of the first sports for women to be involved in?

DOROTHY: To say that golf was one of the first sports that women were involved in, I really don't have the scholarship to support that. I can tell you that Mary Queen of Scots played golf, in fact when she was on trial for the murder of her husband uh one of the articles that was sited was that two days after she had supposedly been involved in his murder, she'd gone out and played golf. We know that Henry VIII's women, one of Henry VIII's wives, Catherine, played golf. She sent him a document saying that while he was off fighting a war in France she was really glad that she had this game of golf to keep her from being bored.



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So we know that women participated very early. One of the earliest non-golf prizes was given to women and most surprisingly of all, to crippled workingwomen. It was to the fisherwomen who were on the links land, obviously on the East coast of Scotland and the first prize they got was a berlin handkerchief which would have been and embroidered kerchief for their heads and a new fishing reel. So that, you know, is pretty significant that we are talking early 1800s so certainly they participated from a for a long time.

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