

Genevieve Hecker

In the early 1900s, a Connecticut teenager's meteoric rise made her U.S. golf's first "Golden Girl."

By Curt Fredrixon

"Miss Stirling, if one can prognosticate safely on such a fickle game as golf, bids fair to be a second Miss Genevieve Hecker, or Mrs. C. T. Stout as she later became. The first time the writer saw Miss Stirling play, which was in the national championship a year ago at Nassau, her appearance and her style alike were reminders of Miss Hecker in the days when she was head and shoulders above any other woman golfer in the country."

"Bunker Hill"
The American Golfer
October, 1915

When Alexa Stirling became the Next Big Thing in U.S. women's golf, there were recent memories of Dorothy Campbell's consecutive national championships and the three such championships that Margaret Curtis had won, so it was telling when "Bunker Hill" leapfrogged them and went to Genevieve Hecker as a basis for comparison. Why would he do that?

Hecker had, clearly, captured the imagination of the golfing public. She arrived fairly suddenly as a teenager and won six times in a seven-year span (which, at that point, was a long career for a top female golfer) the two most important championships for eastern women, despite stepping away from high-level competitive golf for about two years in the middle of this period. Those reading the sports sections of newspapers as far away as Honolulu knew her name and her image (or what they thought was her image; along with photographs were drawings that varied from flattering to unrecognizable). Her thoughts on playing the game appeared in the leading golf magazine of the time and, surely, it was not a rare female golfer who had her book on how to play golf on a shelf in her home. She was considered to be attractive and was said to be nearly as capable at riding, swimming and tennis as she was at golf. Simply put, Genevieve Hecker was U.S. golf's first Golden Girl.

Thus, it was not surprising that she was, still, the basis for comparison almost a decade after she had lifted her last important trophy.

The history of the Hecker family in the U.S. started in 1798 when Johann Jonas Hecker, who had worked in a foundry with his father, took a road trip from his home in Schwalbach (presumably, in modern Germany, although the source claims that the family has Dutch roots) to fulfill a requirement of an artisan guild. He traveled to Rotterdam, where, after working at his trade for a bit, he traveled on a Dutch trading ship to New York City. Once there, he found work at a foundry and machine shop. As a result of this employment, he had a hand in, and possibly initiated,



GENEVIEVE HECKER
c. 1900.

mechanical improvements to *Clermont*, the first steam-powered ship, which was working on the Hudson River at the time.

It was Johann's son, John, who would lead the way to the family fortune. He started a cake and bread bakery when he was 21. Due to supply problems, he decided to build his own flour mill. The enterprise defied more than one fire and grew into a huge business. Hecker & Brother was an innovative firm that introduced such products as Hecker's Patent Self-Raising Flour, which is still available today. On John's death in 1874, his son, John Valentine Hecker, was taken into the family business, which was renamed

George V. Hecker & Co., by his uncle. He would succeed to the company presidency following the death of his uncle in 1888. By then, he had married Georgianna Bell and had, at least, five children. The last, Genevieve, was born at Darien, Conn. on Nov. 19, 1883.

Wealthy people of the time often joined one of the country's newest social phenomena, the country club. So it was with John Valentine Hecker who, shortly after its founding in 1896, joined the Wee Burn Country Club, which was near his home in Noroton, Conn. "John Hecker" is listed in a January 1899 issue of *Golf* as a Wee Burn member, but it is uncertain whether this was John Valentine or his son. Another son, Frederick, was good enough to win the Noroton Cup, apparently competed for by members of various clubs, in 1899. Daughter Louise was known to play golf later. However, it was Genevieve who would become the star.

She was fortunate that Wee Burn had hired Scottish expatriate George Strath as its professional. A native of St. Andrews, he had played in the 1878 Open Championship and was the brother of two other Open contestants, Davie and Andrew (who won the Open in 1865). He was the first professional at Troon and after immigrating to the U.S. played in the first USGA Open Championship. Competition, though, was at the bottom of his list of things to do as a professional. The important thing for this story is that he and his wife encouraged the idea of girls and women playing golf.

Genevieve Hecker would have been about 14 or 15 when she met Strath. Depending on the source, Strath either taught her everything that she knew about golf or he simply tidied her swing after she had worked on her own for about a year. Whichever the path was, she was a quick learner. In May of

1898, she was a 35 handicap. By the end of that year, she had reduced that to 12 and had won a club competition.

In 1899, Hecker entered the USGA Women's Championship at Bala, near Philadelphia. Her 18-hole qualifying score of 105 trailed the medalist, three-time and defending champion Beatrix Hoyt, by eight strokes, although it tied her for ninth qualifier (out of a field of 63) with Miss Ruth Underhill, the eventual winner. Hecker was eliminated in the first round, but one report declared her match with Mrs. J. Franklin McFadden, a 10-handicapper, to be "the best contest of the day" and "a stubborn one throughout," with McFadden winning on the 20th hole. In November, a writer in *Golf* named Hecker as one of five golfers "who competed without much success this year who will be cracking good players in twelve months' time."

For Genevieve Hecker, it would not take that long.

In 1900, she entered the new women's championship of New York City's Metropolitan Golf Association at the Morris County Golf Club, Morristown, N.J. She was, at 16, still relatively unknown. In the first round, she beat Miss Marion Shearson, who had been the champion of the Ontwensia Club, near Chicago, by 4 up and 3 to play. She stepped up in class in the second round against Miss Maud K. Wetmore, the qualifying medalist who had finished second in the previous year's national championship and was thought, by some, to have been kept from winning by a turned ankle. Hecker dispatched Wetmore by the same 4 and 3 score.



BEATRIX HOYT, three-time national champion, was deemed the favorite at Shinnecock in 1900.

At this point, she had the attention of the gallery, but the consensus was that the real test would come the next day, when she would play three-time national champion Beatrix Hoyt and, indeed, Miss Hoyt had Miss Hecker two down at the turn. Hecker responded with a wonderful streak of play and tied Hoyt with two holes to go. At that point, Hoyt, a seasoned top-level player despite her young age, cracked. On the 17th hole, she topped her tee shot into a bunker and lost the hole to go

one down. They halved the 18th hole, so Hoyt was eliminated and Hecker moved on to the final against the reigning national champion, Ruth Underhill.

It would be a short match. After halving the first, Hecker won an astonishing eight consecutive holes, halved the 10th and won the 11th to close out the surely stunned Underhill by 9 and 7. The 16-year-old Hecker had won her first important title by defeating two national champions and a runner-up among her four opponents.

She became well-known after this, stating that the newspapers were worse than census takers regarding her age and, with what was described as a charming little look of feigned despair, told a newspaper reporter, "Never any more can I make myself out younger than I am."



HECKER AT SHINNECOCK HILLS for the Women's U.S. Open, August 1900.



RUTH UNDERHILL was a frequent competitor and a deadly putter.

All eyes were on the new wunderkind when the scene shifted on Aug. 29, 1900 to Shinnecock Hills for the national championship. Persistent drought had overwhelmed the efforts of the greens committee, leaving the course "patchy (and) hard" with "innumerable" unhealed divot holes, although the greens were described as "excellent."

In the first round, Hecker took a quick lead and defeated Mrs. F.E. Wickham of the home club by 4 and 2, but the relatively unheralded Miss Eunice Terry of the Ardsley Club proved to be more difficult in the quarter-final. Terry took the first two holes. Hecker took the next two to draw even, but fell two back on the following two holes and was two down at the turn. She dropped the 10th hole, but pulled to one back on the 17th tee. She lost that hole to be eliminated by 2 and 1.

There was a suggestion that Miss Hecker was affected by "heat prostration" and, indeed, the report on the day in the New York Daily Tribune mentioned the "almost insufferable heat of the morning."

One other noteworthy accomplishment of Hecker's in 1900 was that she was the only golfer to win a match against national champion Miss Frances Griscom during that year, topping her as a representative of New York in the annual Inter-City Matches against Philadelphia on Nov. 8. It was the more remarkable because she had scored 10 on each of the first two holes, losing both to 8s by Miss Griscom.

In 1901, Hecker went to Nassau to defend her Metropolitan Championship. The tournament was played from the men's tees at 6,033 yards. Hecker was the qualifying medalist with a 95. She was only pressed once, this being in her semi-final match with Mrs. H.B. Ashmore, which required a 3 on the 200-yard home hole for the win. Again, she faced Ruth Underhill in the final. Hecker's long game was said to be in a class by itself, but the margin of Underhill's superiority on the greens nearly negated this and what might have been an easy victory was a closer thing. Hecker, also, won the driving contest with a disappointing average of three drives of 134 yards, 1 foot. This was not representative of women's driving distances of the time, which might be reasonably expected to

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DRAWINGS OF GENEVIEVE HECKER as they appeared in various newspapers or national golfing magazines around the turn of the past century.

After she won the 1901 national title at Baltusrol, writers surmised Hecker might hold the title indefinitely, if she were surer with her approaching game and short putts. Her long game was "as pre-eminent as ever."

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have been 25 yards longer, and the reason for the lack of distance is a mystery, as it was noted that the ground was a fair test and that a cross wind was the only mitigating factor.

In October 1901 (to avoid the previous year's heat?), the women gathered at Baltusrol in New Jersey for the Women's Championship. This event was noteworthy for the established golfers who did not reach the top 16 to qualify for match play. These included two former champions, two runners-up and two semi-finalists, plus three-time winner Beatrix Hoyt, who did not enter. Hecker's qualifying score of 96 tied for ninth-lowest and was nine strokes behind medalist Margaret Curtis.

In the first round, Hecker beat Miss Grace Fargo of Seabright, who was not expected to challenge her, by 4 and 2. In the second round, she faced Miss Georgiana Bishop, who had lost in the final to Frances Griscom in the previous year. After a tie and a win at the first two holes, Hecker lost five consecutive holes to go four down. At this point, Hecker replaced the remade rubber-core ball with which she had started the match with a gutta ball and played with guttas for the rest of the tournament.

Bishop had Hecker on the brink of defeat as she was three up with three holes to play, but Hecker fought back, including scoring 4s on the last two holes, to carry the match to the 19th hole and won that with a 6 against a 7. Had this been medal play, Bishop would have won by six strokes. Apparently, the loser of a hole continued to play until holed out and only two holes accounted all of those strokes.

In the semi-final, Hecker faced Mrs. E.A. Manice, who had become a familiar face late in these events and about whom it was written that none at this event had played better. Hecker beat Mrs. Manice 2 and 1 to reach the final against a visitor from afar: Miss Lucy Herron of Cincinnati. Western golfers

were rare visitors to the national championship at this time and Miss Herron was the first to reach a final. She led once, at the third hole and was only one down after ten holes, but Hecker went to work and won four of the next five holes to close out the match by 5 and 3 to become the Women's Champion of the United States. She was regarded as a deserving champion and it was written that if she were surer with her approaching and short putts, she might hold the title indefinitely, as her long game was "as pre-eminent as ever."

In the driving competition, Hecker finished third with a drive of 176.5 yards with Margaret Curtis finishing first with a drive of almost 194 yards. It was noted that most golfers were using rubber-cored balls this year and that this accounted for a substantial distance increase over previous driving competitions.

There may have been a pattern of a national champion's curse emerging in the November Inter-City matches between New York and Philadelphia. This time, it struck Miss Hecker, as she lost by four to Mrs. Caleb Fox. It was reported that she "had been ailing for some days past (and) was completely off her game and very erratic."

In 1902, Hecker switched to The Apawamis Club from the Essex County Country Club, to which she had moved from Wee Burn in 1901, presumably when her family left Darien, Conn. It must be wondered if her fame had ignited a bidding war between clubs for her membership.

She attempted to go for the three-peat at the Women's Metropolitan Golf Championship, which was held at the Essex County Country Club in Orange, N.J. in June. At 5,000 yards, it was a substantially shorter track than Nassau had been. Essex County member Miss Elizabeth Goffe, scorched the course in qualifying with an 86 that bettered Miss Hecker's second-best qualifying score by five strokes. Alas, Miss Goffe was a nervous and easy first-round victim of Mrs. Manice by 6 and 5.

A record of Hecker's first round result was not found (it appears that she defeated Mrs. B.F. Sanford of the home club). In the second round she faced her final opponent of the previous two Metropolitan Championships, Ruth Underhill, and crushed her by 7 and 6, and 15 strokes on the medal card. Hecker's medal score was reported as 77, compared to a men's amateur record for the course of 74 and a professional record of 69. This lowered the women's record for the course by seven strokes.

However, she was far off her form in the semi-final against Mrs. Manice, whose course record she had just broken and who continued her march to the top ranks of the sport. Hecker's tee-to-green game was off to the extent that she was being outdriven by Mrs. Manice, who was not a short hitter, but not in a class with Hecker at her best. Despite being off-form, she almost held her own to the green, but was "vastly inferior" after her arrival there and eventually lost by 4 and 3 to Mrs. Manice, who went on to easily defeat yet another Essex County member, Miss Helen Hernandez, by 7 and 6 for her first Metropolitan Championship.

The 1902 Women's Championship at The Country Club in Brookline, Mass. was different for a couple of reasons. It marked the first time the Championship was sited in the Boston area (and only the second time outside of the New York City area) and the number of match play qualifiers was doubled to 32. The event was plagued by rain, which made the low qualifying score of 89 – 8 strokes lower than the 1901 medalist score – impressive. This score was posted in "detestable" weather by Margaret Curtis and home club member Miss Louisa A. Wells.

Hecker had taken a month off after the Metropolitan Championship, but practiced "assiduously" for weeks before she arrived in Brookline. She qualified with a 96 and disposed of Mrs. E. Sanford of Essex County by 3 and 2 on a day that featured a cold rain from the northeast. In the second round, she was matched against a familiar foe in Ruth Underhill, who, surely, was becoming weary of the sight of Miss Hecker, who beat her, this time, by a relatively merciful 4 and 3.

The next round featured Hecker, the national champion, against Miss Bessie Anthony, the Western Golf Association champion. Again showing the folly of counting her out, Hecker won the final three holes to turn a one-shot deficit into a two-up victory. Hecker was a better golfer than Anthony, but the latter developed a hot putter and the five longest putts that she holed totaled 94 feet. It was reported that Hecker, who was, typically, putting poorly, realized that she could only beat Anthony by reaching the green in one less stroke, which she generally did. This match began with a gallery of about 300 spectators, but it swelled to more than a thousand by the end.

Hecker's semi-final opponent was Mrs. W.M. Gorham of Philadelphia, who was blessed with neither a pretty swing nor distance, but was deep in poise and used what she had to topple the formidable Mrs. Manice and Margaret Curtis. Her match with Hecker was a matter of good golf being beaten by really good golf. Hecker's front nine 41 was the best nine of the tournament, but Mrs. Gorham cut her lead from 5 strokes to 2 after 14 holes before Hecker decided that that had been enough of that. She won the next two holes to close out the

match by 4 and 2 and move to the final against Louisa Wells, who would be playing her home course.

The weather was clear and "could not be improved upon." A gallery of 3,000 was on hand to see the championship decided. In Wells, Hecker faced that rare opponent whom she could not outdrive. One of Wells' drives in a previous match had been measured at 210 yards (and remember that there had been recent wet weather) and she typically outdrove Hecker by 15 to 45 yards.

It would not be enough for Wells as Hecker had it all working, even her maligned short game and her normally balky putter as she repeatedly laid putts from the edges of the greens almost dead to the cup. Wells, despite five tee shots of at least 200 yards, with the best traveling 230, saw her advantage evaporate by the time she could address her ball for her second shot. Hecker led by four at the turn, with a 42 on the front. Wells cut that to three at the 14th hole. If she could halve the 15th, the last three holes at Brookline were places where her length would be very advantageous. Hecker eliminated that threat with a 5 to Well's 6. The match was over and the 18-year-old had defended her national championship.

At the end of 1902, Miss Genevieve Hecker was the consensus queen of United States women's golf and there was a report she intended to travel to the United Kingdom to play in its women's championship in the following year. Surely, many were surprised when the country's dominant female golfer, at the peak of her powers and with more triumphs, seemingly, hers for the taking, was absent from several of the most important competitions over the next two years.

First in a two-part article.

Resources

Library of Congress digital newspaper archive:

Barre (VT) Evening Telegram
Honolulu Evening Bulletin
Indianapolis Journal
New York Evening World
New York Sun
New York Tribune
New York World
Pacific Commercial Advertiser (Honolulu)
St. Paul Globe
Washington Evening Star
Washington Times

Magazines from the USGA archive:

Golf, USGA Bulletin
The American Golfer
The Golfer

Schlegel's German-American Families in the United States, *Carl Wilhelm Schlegel, New York Edition, Volume 1 (New York, American Historical Society, 1916), pp. 42-57*

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Genevieve Hecker

part II

Marriage, motherhood,
and a return to golf

By Curt Fredrixon

The second of a two-part article that began with the December Bulletin No. 205.

At the start of 1903, Miss Genevieve Hecker was the current national women's golfing champion and regarded as the best of her gender in the country. For her fans and most other observers, it surely was a surprise that the most significant walk that she would take in 1903 would not be down a fairway, but down the proverbial aisle.

There had been several mentions in the media of a suitor for Hecker in the person of Mr. George Jenkins. He was described as being an old school friend of hers who had taught her to play golf. His country home in Stamford, Conn. was near the Hecker family residence. On Sept. 6, 1901, *The World* (New York City) displayed a teaser ad for "The Romance of Miss Genevieve Hecker, The Golf Champion":

So remarkable and romantic is the love story of Miss Hecker and Mr. Jenkins that it forms a prominent feature in next Sunday's World.

Hecker and Jenkins announced their engagement in September 1901, but this engagement was broken off in the spring of 1902.

Charles Taber Stout was a native of Staten Island. He was born in 1872, the son of John W. Stout, an "oldtime leather merchant." He was reported to be a successful (and, presumably, sufficiently wealthy) "broker." There was a report that associated him with Wall Street but, in 1912, he was described as "a real estate operator," so what he was brokering is uncertain. Later in the teens, he was an officer of a company that made creosote-based "medicines." In 1903, he was the captain of the Richmond County Country Club golf team and chairman of the club's greens committee. His and Hecker's paths would cross at the 1901 Women's Championship at Baltusrol.

Taber was a crack golfer (a five-handicap at his best in 1907), who was initially attracted to her play and then to



MISS GENEVIEVE HECKER.
The women's golf champion, who was married
to Charles Taber Stout.

"THE WOMAN GOLF CHAMPION." A published announcement of Hecker's marriage to Charles Stout in April 1903.



GENEVIEVE HECKER, c. 1902.

her. As he was then 29 and she had not yet reached her 18th birthday, it may have been thought prudent to go slowly, but it is likely that the campaign for her hand was under way. This can only be guessed at as the couple proceeded quietly, believing that their prominence in the golfing world would draw undesirable publicity (from *The World*, perhaps) to their upcoming union. This tactic appears to have been quite successful, as none of Hecker's "ordinary" friends knew that Stout was more than a casual golfing acquaintance and they believed that, if she married, it would be to Jenkins. The wedding took place at her father's house in New York City on April 21, 1903, with only immediate family present.

1903 Women's Metropolitan Golf Championship

The new Mrs. Stout had stated that marriage would not displace golf from her life and she duly appeared at the Richmond County Country Club for the 1903 Women's Metropolitan Golf Association (WMGA) Championship after a recent practice score of 83 that only a few men had bested. In the first round, while not scoring particularly well, she closed Mrs. W. Fellowes Morgan out early, the margin being 7 up with 5 to play. In the second round, she topped Miss Marie Charles, giving a "fine exhibition of the long game" with one tee shot that exceeded 200 yards. Stout continued through the third round with a comfortable 6 & 5 win over Mrs. M.D. Patterson. Her fourth-round opponent was Miss Louise Vanderhoef. Stout took a quick two-hole lead, but could not extend it further. She was one up at the turn, but lost four of the next five holes to go three down. She won the 15th and 16th holes with pars and it looked like another back-nine miracle might be in the works, but she drove into the rough on No. 17, played out badly and missed a short putt to lose the hole to Vanderhoef's 5 and the match by 2 down. Mrs. E.A. Manice beat Vanderhoef 4 & 3 in the final to defend her title.

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1906 WMGA Championship

Stout was in better form when she arrived at Englewood (N.J.) Golf Club to defend her WMGA title. The entry of 35 was disappointing. Only the top eight qualifiers entered the match play for the championship. Her approaching and putting hurt her, but her dominant long game was back and she was the second qualifier, five strokes behind Miss Georgiana Bishop of Brooklawn.

Stout played her first nine holes against Miss Elizabeth Hurry of the host club in 44 and cruised to a 4 & 2 victory. She defeated Mrs. S. F. Lefferts, also of Englewood, 3 & 1. She outdrove Lefferts by about 30 yards, but the latter's putting, combined, undoubtedly, with superior knowledge of her home club's greens, kept her competitive. In the final, Stout faced the qualifying medalist, Bishop, and she had to play her best for a one-up win at the final green.

Stout did not play in the national championship. She did appear at the new stroke-play championship of the Women's Eastern Golf Association, but her scores of 95 and 91 for 186 left her seven strokes behind Miss Fanny Osgood. After this, it appears that she returned to "hibernation" not to emerge until 1909.

1909 U.S. Women's Amateur Championship

Stout returned to the national championship in 1909 at the Merion Cricket Club. She had gotten a little competitive practice for it in an innovative way by partnering with male professional T. Mulgrew for the pro-am event that preceded the men's Metropolitan Golf Association Championship at Wykagyl. She was allowed to play and, despite unreliable putting, scored about 89 on her own ball. Her long game was reported to be good. Before the women's championship, she would lower the women's course record at Richmond County to 79.

At Merion, her driving on the front nine was unsteady and she had to do the back in 43 to score 95, which was nine strokes behind the top qualifier, Mrs. Caleb Fox. There was a British invasion this year, with three of the top 13 qualifiers being from "over there." Stout won her first-round match over Miss Anita Phipps by 4 & 3 and beat 1900 champion and host club member Miss Frances Griscom by 2 & 1 to meet Miss Dorothy Campbell of North Berwick, possibly the best of the British contingent, in the third round. She would fall by 2 & 1 to Campbell, who would win the championship and



MRS. C.T. STOUT AND MISS DOROTHY CAMPBELL as the two were shown in the December 1909 issue of *Golf*, the USGA Bulletin.

successfully defend it the following year.

This appears to have been the last appearance of Mrs. Charles T. Stout in the national championship. She would host Campbell at her home clubs, Apawamis and Richmond County, and would lose matches to her on both occasions. Perhaps she felt that her time had passed. She was wealthy and several years short of 30 and there were many other things that she could do. However, she did almost nothing that attracted media coverage.

An assessment of Genevieve Hecker

This assessment must be considered within the context that the standard of women's golf in the early 20th century was not like it is now. Even Miss Hecker/Mrs. Stout was capable of duffing a tee shot. However, it appears that she raised the standard of the women's game in the U.S. Her big weapon was her long game. She was not the longest hitter, but she was pretty long for the time and reliably so. She could, frequently, reach a green a stroke ahead of her opponent and force resorting to a pitch and a putt to match her. This was important, as her own approaching and putting could be a liability. Leading her after nine holes meant little as she frequently overtook opponents on the back nine. Her game had some principles that were, by modern standards, unsound, but by those standards she was pretty orthodox and, probably, more so than her American predecessors.

She was aware of the methods of the best male golfers, she consulted professionals, and she appeared to have done a lot of Hogan-like thinking about, and experimenting with, the game. She had firm ideas of what would and would not work and she could, sometimes, quantify how much an incorrect method would penalize. That she was regarded for close to a decade as the best woman golfer that the U.S. had produced was well-earned.

A bright light quietly fades

Presumably, Stout was playing golf after 1909 at a level that did not attract the attention of the news media. Occurrences of her name in *Golf* diminished to the monthly ads for *Golf for Women*. By 1914, the \$2 book was a 39-cent closeout item. She reappeared in 1925 in the MGA Women's Championship on the 25th anniversary of her first entry in the event. She had won that time, but this time was a first-round casualty.

Although her husband had sued her for divorce on grounds of infidelity in 1912, the suit was quietly dropped two years later with both parties denying that the suit had happened and, when she died on Aug. 1, 1960 at the age of 76, she was laid to rest beside her husband, who had died 13 years earlier, in Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn, N.Y. Online burial records give her name as "Genevieve Hector Stout" and a graves web site does not list the woman who had once been known across the nation for her prowess with a golf club among the "famous" burials at Greenwood.

Sic transit gloria.

This article was abridged by the author to fit the available space. A digital copy of the full article will be provided on request to howker2012@yahoo.com.

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