

Nichols—Granddaddy of the Pros

By Bill English

THE most important date in Bill Nichols' life isn't June 5, 1908, the day he arrived in Muskogee as a 26-year-old youngster fresh from Scotland to take a job as professional at the Muskogee Town and Country club.

You'd never guess—it's April 5, 1912, the day the Titanic struck an iceberg south of Newfoundland on its maiden voyage to New York with more than 1,500 lives lost.

Nichols, now known affectionately as "the grand old man of Oklahoma golf," will never forget the great maritime disaster although the closest he got was reading about it in a Muskogee newspaper.

He remembers it well because he was scheduled to have sailed from Liverpool, England, on the Titanic!

These were the circumstances as reconstructed in his rich Scottish brogue:

"I had gone home to Scotland on vacation in the autumn of 1911 and planned to return to Muskogee early in the spring of 1912.

"Willie Brown, another Scotchman whom I had persuaded to come to Oklahoma, and a companion I remember as Neal, went to Liverpool and booked passage on the Titanic."

They, of course, were awed by the liner which held the record for size and speed and looked forward to sailing on it although the departure date was two weeks away. The wait would be worthwhile, they figured.

"However, Neal, a businessman, received word from his company in

the United States that an important meeting he was to attend had been set up and he was ordered to return as soon as possible.

"He offered his apologies to Willie and me for having to withdraw from our party and booked passage on another ship leaving almost immediately. Willie and I talked it over and decided we might as well cancel our passage on the Titanic and accompany Neal."

THAT'S one chapter in the life of Bill Nichols, the most outstanding figure in Oklahoma's 50-year-old golfing history. There are many more, almost equally dramatic.

He's been on the Sooner scene 37 of the 50 years golf has flourished in the state, building and guiding the game in countless capacities.

He has been a club professional, golf course builder, a framer of the Oklahoma State Golf association's first by-laws, an executive of the association and a participant in its tournaments to this day.

In 1909, the first officers of the Oklahoma State Golf association invited him to help frame the by-laws of the brand new organization because of their limited experience in such matters "and because I knew something about golf."

"The 'something' is a bit of understatement in this instance since Bill's father started him in the game in 1890 in Scotland when Bill was only 8 years old, so he already had been at it 19 years when asked to assist in the association's organization.

After two years at Muskogee, he

laid out another nine holes and in 1924 he and Perry Maxwell teamed up to build the course over from scratch, at the same time installing grass greens.

Nichols also was to serve as both secretary-treasurer and president of the state association, filling the former post in 1919-26-27-28-29 and the presidency in 1931-32-33-42.

HE has won more state championships than anyone else, annexing the Open in 1910-11-14-16, the Amateur in 1925-27 and the Seniors in 1939-46, two of the four years the latter event has been held.

He was medalist in the Amateur in 1921 with 33-38—71 at the old Oklahoma City Golf and Country club when a score like that was akin to sighting the Holy Grail. He was medalist in the Amateur again in 1929 with a 76 at Ardmore when he

"played poorly and was disgusted with himself.

Except for five years when he was the Lakewood Country club in Dallas, and a service hitch in World war I, he has lived continuously in Muskogee, applying for reinstatement as an amateur right after the war and securing it after a five-year waiting period.

But the story may grow a bit dull when it consists mainly of facts and figures. Nichols, as a man and per-

sonality, is much more interesting. Today Bill Nichols (he likes to be just plain Bill to everybody) is a successful businessman in Muskogee, 67 years old (and doesn't mind admitting it), a close follower of Muskogee high school's athletic fortunes and a refreshing figure on the sports scene.

YOU might even mistake Nichols for a weekend golfer at Muskogee if you weren't aware of his trademarks—an ever-present pipe and an uncanny touch with the short irons.

He still takes part in Oklahoma's tournaments, wouldn't think of missing the fellowship they afford, hasn't skipped one since heaven knows when and still shoots a pretty fair brand of golf! (In the 1948 Amateur at Muskogee, he opened with a 76 in the qualifying rounds.)

But his fun is in watching the youngsters and other fellows in state tournaments and he gets a lot of enjoyment in trudging 36 holes a day as referee or spectator during a meet.

Bill says he gave up serious golf after winning his second Amateur title in 1927 because trying to win all the time was ruining the fun of the game for him.

That's somewhat misleading, for Bill didn't exactly take on a defeatist complex then and doesn't have one now. It merely is his philosophy—no worries regardless of the outcome once the round is over.

He still retains his competitive tenacity and can be just as tough as ever. (Three birdies in a row at the start of a match in a friendly foursome and a 71 for the afternoon adds up to a pretty good day's work!)

A believe-it-or-not: He's played golf every New Year day for 52 consecutive years, starting in 1899.

Nick has 10 holes-in-one to his credit, probably the high watermark for any Oklahoman. His biggest thrill in golf? His first ace in 1923 during the State Open.