



It may be a cow pasture, but it's

'OUR COW PASTURE'

By Patrick Jones

It was a banner year in the city of Atlanta in 1928. Some of the Georgia capital's most memorable landmarks made their debut in the waning months of the Roaring Twenties. Times were good. Fallout from a traumatic slide in the nation's stock market the following October was still imperceptible on the economic radar.

The Swan House, one of the city's premier mansions in the Buckhead area, was completed that year. Georgia Tech dropout Frank Gordy opened The Varsity in 1928. The Atlanta fast-food institution has since served millions of childidogs, onion rings and frosted orange drinks to natives and visitors alike, including several

U.S. presidents.

On the local sports scene, the city's most revered non-professional athlete, golfer Bobby Jones, won his fourth U.S. Amateur title.

With less fanfare, Candler Park Golf Course also opened for play in 1928. The nine-hole executive course sits on the shadow's edge of modern-day Atlanta's rugged skyline. The hilly plot of rectangular land just south of Ponce de Leon Avenue has birthed fledgling, working-class golf games for nearly 80 years. From hickory-shafted mashie niblicks to 460cc titanium drivers, the old girl has seen it all.

Candler Park Golf Course represents a microcosm of the city of Atlanta.

It has experienced the best: Golfers from across the socio-economic spectrum mix in harmony on the course in the hometown of the visionary civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

It has experienced the worst: Atlanta bills itself as “The City Too Busy To Hate,” yet it has led the nation in murder rate per capita.

Candler Park Golf Course has not escaped that irony: A lifeless victim was once found dumped on its practice putting green.

Both in glory and ignominy, it remains the ultimate in no-pretentiousness, no-tee-times-taken, public park golf.

Investigating the history of Candler Park

Beau Rasnick, Candler Park’s general manager and superintendent, defers to Shifalo when it comes to discussing the colorful history of the layout.

One local legend proffers that Candler Park was once a regulation 18-hole layout.

“I have it on the best authority that that is true,” says Shifalo, 64, who holds a day job as director of the Little Five Points Community Center. “But I have been able to find no historical layout, no hole diagrams or any other evidence that it was ever 18 holes ... except for all of these guys who said that they played the course when it was 18 holes.”

Another favored fable is that some notable names in golf – Chi Chi Rodriguez, Patty Berg and local legends Bobby Jones and Louise Suggs – played the course in its earlier years.

The only confirmed sighting is that of Rel Suggs, brother of Louise, who was a starter at Candler Park Golf Course as recently as the 1990s.

Yet another urban myth – or unconfirmed absolute truth – is that a woman, Helen Smith, was the architect, and that she carved the course out of the rolling terrain with the help of her two sons and a backhoe. Smith’s supposed inspiration was her not being allowed to play at other local clubs of the era because she was a woman. An unverified

scorecard from the course’s early days purportedly had language on it requesting that women refrain from wearing high heels when playing.

A hard certainty is that there is positively nothing upscale about Candler Park Golf Course.

Clover leaves outnumber blades of grass in the fairways of the par-31 course that plays to 1,981 yards. Its dated Bermuda greens decelerate putts like air brakes on an 18-wheeler. Untrimmed tree branches smack down all but exacting shots to the fifth green and the sixth fairway. Joggers and bikers share the walking path to the ninth hole, which is breathtakingly uphill in a literal sense. Marginal slices on the closing hole rebound off the asphalt of Candler Park Road



BREAKDOWN: WHEN EQUIPMENT FAILS, IT'S NOT ALWAYS HUSTLED OUT OF THE WAY.

Golf Course unearths more unsubstantiated lore than confirmed facts. A plaque on the side of the brick clubhouse verifies the year the course was dedicated and opened for play by Atlanta Mayor I.N. Ragsdale. It is undisputed that the land was once owned by Coca-Cola founder Asa Candler, who later donated it to the city.

After that, the oral history passed down over the decades has become burdened with embellishments and contradictions that are tough to resolve.

Joe Shifalo has been a regular at Candler Park Golf Course for more than 15 years, often playing there at least three times a week. A self-titled “community activist,” he has researched available archived material on the course and is considered its de facto historian.

and ricochet onto the grounds of Mary Lin Elementary School across the street.

The city of Atlanta has granted inconsistent funding and minimal maintenance to Candler Park Golf Course throughout the years. Former mayors Maynard Jackson and Bill Campbell played the course, but it fell into disrepair on several occasions. Despite the neglect, the local neighborhood has risen in defiance whenever rumors swirled that the course was on the verge

of being abandoned or sold off to developers. Corporation in June 2006. A new irrigation system has been installed. Renovations are in progress to the interior of the original clubhouse. There is discussion of overhauling all nine greens in 2007.

American Golf, however, is being very careful not to influence what is most precious at Candler Park Golf Course. That is its character – and the characters that frequent it.

“We are trying to fix it up and turn it into a nicer golf course,” says general manager Rasnick. “But we also want to keep that homey feel to it where everyone is still comfortable and it is not slammed packed out here. Business-wise it would be great to start taking tee times, but that is not the kind of course that the regular golfers here are looking for.”

The powerful allure of Candler Park Golf Course is, and has always been, its eclectic approachability. It offers golf in its most democratic form. Race, creed, color, income and handicaps (disabilities or stroke averages) are unimportant. Clientele includes mechanics, executives, college students and the terminally unemployed.

Anyone willing to park on the street – there is no parking lot to speak of –

and plunk down about a buck a hole to play (a tad higher for non-city residents) is welcome to freely join in the game without judgment. Maybe it is just sheer coincidence that the laid-back First Existentialist Church of Atlanta chose to station its house of worship directly across the street from the No. 2 tee box.

“The population that makes up the golfers at Candler Park is quite a diverse group,” says Shifalo. “There are folks from the inner city that are probably the first generation in their family ever to pick up a golf club. And you come across guys that have been playing most of their lives that were taught by their fathers, who were also taught by their fathers.

“Every ethnic and international group is represented,” says Shifalo. “There are folks from the theater groups and local rock 'n roll bands. All kinds of closet golfers play at Candler Park.” ♦



DOWNSCALE: GRAFFITI BEHIND THE SEVENTH GREEN

of being abandoned or sold off to developers.

“The course has looked pretty rugged at times,” says Shifalo. “But it was our golf course. It was a cow pasture, but it was our cow pasture, and we liked to play to golf there.”

Shifalo likes to share the story of the time he was readying to tee off on No. 1. He watched in bemusement as a mother and her three children spread a blanket on the ground in the middle of the first fairway and started handing out sandwiches.

“They didn’t realize it was a golf course, and that we’re standing up there with these whizzing pellets that could hit them in the side of the head,” says Shifalo. “I don’t think there are many other golf courses where you will find picnickers in the middle of the fairway.”

Fortunately for the regulars, improvements are well under way. The city turned over management control to American Golf