

DIGGING TEXAS GOLF

by Frances G. Trimble

Illustration by Jack Jackson

For the past fifteen years I have engaged in on-again, off-again, research to find the first reference to golf in Texas. When I began the dig in 1984, Texas golf history was what happened in the thirties or what Ben Hogan and Lloyd Mangrum shot in the 1940 Western Open at Houston's River Oaks CC.

I figured anything that happened a mere three years before I was born could not possibly qualify as history. So, I began to crank the old microfilm readers backward, surveying sports pages (when there were such things) and obscure mentions of oddball occurrences. After an in-depth study of the history of the Texas Open – the mother of today's PGA Tour, I wrote a series that traced the origins of that Texas invention and other professional golf events in the early twenties. I located early attempts at golf course construction in the 1890s and great stuff about itinerant professionals that trekked through the state.

There is conclusive proof of an exhibition of golf by two amateurs that took place in San Antonio in 1887. The event was actually discovered by Dr. Donald Everett, a Trinity University professor, but was later corroborated by a story in Harper's Weekly Advertiser in January 1911. I have good reason to believe that golf may have been in the South much earlier and perhaps even in Texas prior to statehood.

This is what we know for certain: A man named Cumming McDonough lived or visited in San Antonio in the 1880s. Although this man's name is not found in public records, that of George MacDonough/McDona is found and perhaps George was a relative of Cumming. In any case, Cumming was a golfer and he enlisted the help of an Army officer at old Fort Sam Houston named Lt. Charles C. Ballou in laying out nine holes on the post's parade ground. It was a big deal. People came to watch and a front-page story appeared in the newspaper. McDonough described the game, proper golfing attire back in old England, and the fact that golf was also played in India and other places.

In a piece published years later, then Major Ballou said, "It seems I can fairly claim to be the oldest golf-player in the United States in point of years playing, and I am still surer that I am the poorest." Ballou was convinced he had played the first course in America in 1887 and while that is doubtful, the San Antonio links did predate the course played by New York's "Apple Tree Gang" by a decade.

Why do I believe golf arrived earlier than the 1880s? In 1875, at a traditional Hogmanay celebration of the Saint Andrew Society in Memphis, Tennessee, former Confederate States of America President Jefferson Davis gave a speech about his visits to Scotland. Davis described the country in glowing terms and the game of golf in some detail. As of this date, there is neither proof that Davis actually played golf or that he didn't. However, he wrote the following in a letter to Dr. Charles MacKay, Scottish poet and journalist, in 1870: "It is so doubtful as to my being able to go to Scotland this season, that I suppress the wish ... I will write to Mr. Blackwood using as an excuse something I have to say to him about wood for golf sticks."

Later, in the Memphis speech, he said things about golf that only someone who understood the game could possibly appreciate.

Davis said, "In this town of St. Andrews, though the ruins of the ancient Abbey alone remain, one of the ancient sports is still preserved – the royal game of golf. That is the place where golf is played above all others. There they not only play golf in fair weather, but they play it when the mist is falling, so that it is said it won't wet a Scotsman, but it will wet an Englishman to the bone. And when the weather is so very bad that they cannot go afield the ardent lovers of the game study topographical maps in their houses, on which is delineated the bunkers, the gorse, and all the accidents of the ground which may affect the success of the player." Davis witnessed a mental rehearsal of strategy and the mapping of a golf ground.

Jeff Davis greatly admired the Scots because they worked hard and did not apologize for putting work aside to play hard. Having fun was something Jeff Davis, mired in the defeat of the Confederacy, was never able to do.

During one trip to Scotland, he visited the Old Course at St. Andrews where he saw golf being played and he picked harebells (flowers) on the course for his wife's collection. He also visited the western part of Scotland where cotton mills proliferated and where local sympathies lay with the ill-fated Confederate cause. Scotland maintained strong ties to the South during and after the Civil War and Davis was an honored guest.

Also during one of these trips, Jeff Davis was accompanied by his dear friend, Texas Governor Francis R. Lubbock. Though I have located no written proof as yet, I believe Lubbock also saw golf played. Did Davis visit Lubbock in Texas? Yes. Davis made a much-heralded trip to Austin in 1874. Did he bring his sticks? I wish I knew.

If Southerners and Texans – especially the large number of cotton merchants and growers – saw golf and knew about golf, why can't we find evidence that they played golf? We know that just before the turn of the century, founders of Dallas Golf Club were in fact cotton men and that one, H. L. Edwards, was born in Wales.

Prior to Edwards' time, however, our ancestors were inclined to mimic the Scots. They worked hard but spent little time playing games or chit-chatting about non-essential stuff. They deadened their aim using live targets and live ammunition and they discussed love, war, death, and money, not necessarily in that order.

For the Scots, golf was an essential part of life and an almost everyday occurrence. For Texans, it was probably something they did in two's and three's behind the barn, when reporters weren't watching.

There is an old, and oft-told tale about two heroes of the Alamo – Davy Crockett and John McGregor – who entertained during periods of boredom just prior to being overrun by Santa Anna's thundering herd of soldados. Davy played a fiddle. John McGregor played his bagpipe. Think about this for a second.

In order to play his bagpipe, John McGregor would have transported the instrument-from-Hell all the way to Tennessee and from there, by horseback, to a God-forsaken, broken-down mission in northern Mexico. Wherever they went, the Scots and Scots-Irish took their heritage along. They didn't talk much about their parents because ancestry was considered a bad British hangover. One suspects, however, they took their marksmanship and love of competition along. Perhaps one of the Alamo defenders suggested a game where targets were identified, then pelted with rocks or nuts propelled with inverted walking sticks.

We have proof that by the 1850s Texans did purchase walking sticks with perpendicular handles at one end that were made in Tennessee of native hickory.

A preponderance of evidence suggests that golf was in Texas early and that's enough to keep me digging.*

*Information about President Jefferson Davis' trips to Scotland was obtained with the help of Barbara J. Rozek and Lynda L. Crist, The Papers of Jefferson Davis, Rice University, Houston, TX. The story about Cumming MacDonough's golf exhibition appeared in the San Antonio Express, February 20, 1887.

