

Revolution Park Historic Preservation Project: Oral Histories-Revolution Golf Course

Del Ratcliffe is the owner and operator of Ratcliffe Golf Services which manages public golf courses in Charlotte. Del was also a member of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Planning Commission.

The community is supportive of the expansion and improvement of the golf course. There is an aging of the community in older parts of town and major facilities like Revolution Park. Revolution is a 9-hole golf course that has not seen significant investment in a long time. Now, it is the subject of a number of projects that is turning the area around. First Tee has come on board to teach life skills and golf to young people. The new sports facility is also an asset.

Revolution Park was one of the original public developments that spurred residential development. Osmond Barringer (Barringer Drive, Barringer Woods, and Barringer Elementary School as it was known then) stipulated in the deed that his donated land should be used for a park and golf course and he would develop the residential housing around it. There aren't any easily attainable plans of the original golf course and park. But, it was designed so anyone from the general public could come and play. It was built in the 1930's by the Army Corps of Engineers. At that time the government wanted to stimulate the economy by building infrastructure projects like parks and golf courses.

Revolution Park is the most historically significant golf course in Charlotte. It was the first public course in Charlotte. It was the ground zero location for racial integration in the Southeast. It opened up the game of golf to anyone who wanted to play the game. The significance is head and shoulders above any other course in the area. Fast forward to now, we're seeing neighborhoods revitalize as people see the value of living close to the city center. A golf course is a great way to preserve open space and recreate. It's an active sport on a very attractive setting. It's a beautiful piece of property this close to the center city. The neighborhood will never want to get rid of it.

The land was gifted to the city by Osmond Barringer, a notable Charlottean in his day. He was seeking to develop his donated property as an amenity to the residential development. A quirk in the gift was a revision clause in the deed that it would revert back to the Barringer family if blacks were allowed to use the course and park (late 1920's or 1930's). **Listed through register of deeds. He sold 50 acres to the City for no less than 17,500. Kelly Alexander**

The real battle for desegregation began in 1951 of the golf course. This started the whole process and spurred the Civil Rights case. Golf was a very restrictive sport against African Americans. As late as 30-40 years later the same types of Civil Rights cases were still being fought, mostly on private courses.

There was an incident at Bonnie Brae on the 4th tee. Someone came through the woods and robbed, shot and killed one of the golfers. The city erected a fence to protect the golfers. The National Guard came in the 1950's during the Civil Rights case; it was overdramatized based on what others have told me. Charlotte was seen as docile compared to other cities. It was a peaceful protest by 16 plaintiffs in the original lawsuit. The case was won by the plaintiffs in December of 1956. In January 1957 James Otis Williams was the first African American to play the course.

The judge that issued the ruling was Susie Sharp, Superior Court Judge. A self-described racist, she ruled on the law and not of her own feelings. This was highly unusual and a special time in Charlotte at that time.

Famous players such as Charlie Sifford, who is the first African American to be inducted in the PGA Hall of Fame, played here and lived in Charlotte for a short time. He also caddied at Carolina Golf Club on what is now Donald Ross Road. James Black, a friend of Charlie's and an accomplished golfer in his own right played on this course as well. There is not shortage of history on this course.

There are a higher percentage of African Americans at Revolution now but not significantly so. Golf courses draw within a five mile radius generally. We still get a diverse crowd playing at Revolution. The course has overcome the stigma of being an unsafe course. I see a lot of young couples and elderly females and leagues playing at the course now. The perception is not as bad now.

The Revolution Park golf course has a history that is truly a product of its environment. It's an asset that the community can take pride in. When it reopens it will be light years ahead of where it was.

The interview was conducted Sarah Blanchette, a public history graduate student at UNCC on April 17, 2010. The story was edited by John Howard, Revolution Park Neighborhood Association President.