

A Short History of the Greenville Country Club Col. Frank Foster*

In 1895 a small group of young Greenville men led by Will Sirrine, Frank Capers, Edge Blythe, Frazer Mathewes, Perry Beattie, Bob Hazelhurst, and Dan Martin purchased 60 acres and built a rough golf course on the edge of Piney Mountain. The property, a grassy meadow carved out of the hillside and believed to have been located near the old Shriner's hospital, was the site of the nine hole course. The course, with a crude clubhouse built under an over-hanging rock and grazed by sheep, was constructed only seven years after the first permanent-site golf course in the United States was laid out in a cow pasture near Yonkers, NY. Will Sirrine appears to have brought the idea of golf back to Greenville from his time as a reporter for the *New York Post*.

Their course was said to be difficult to play and, combined with the trip out and back by horse and buggy, a nine-hole round took almost a full day. By the early 1900s the Piney Mountain group had grown to almost 50 players. As the group and the game's popularity grew so did the demand for a more formal club, which led to a search for a new location.

Around 1903 the golfers at Piney Mountain began to look for a place they could have a more polished golf course and a clubhouse suitable for the ladies. About that time the Sans Souci estate of former Governor Benjamin F. Perry become available. The estate was located north of downtown Greenville on North Franklin St. and was called Sans Souci, meaning "carefree" in French. Following Perry's death in 1886, the home had been converted into a private finishing school for young ladies. Eventually the Perry heirs sold the mansion and about 480 acres for \$30,000 to Hamlin Beattie's Piedmont Savings and Investment

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Company. Under the leadership of Captain Ellison Adger Smyth, Frank Capers, and the Sirrine brothers (Will and J. E.); the mansion and 57 acres were leased from the Franklin Holding Company, which had taken over the Piedmont Savings and Investment Company.

Stock in the new club was quickly sold to about 50 Greenville men, most of whom were already golfing enthusiasts at the Piney Mountain course. This marked the formal beginning of what would become the Greenville Country Club. Capt. Ellison Smyth, a prominent textile executive, was elected first president of the new Sans Souci Country Club.



Sans Souci Country Club

The new club opened in 1905. The original three-story Victorian-style mansion was refitted into a semi-modern clubhouse with dining rooms, locker rooms, a dance hall, and verandahs. The golf course was a nine-hole layout of 2,634 yards, featuring crossing fairways. Two clay tennis courts were built, and cricket was also played on occasion at the club. The initiation fee in 1905 was ten dollars, with annual dues of twenty dollars.

Sans Souci got off to quick start with the members enjoying golfing, teas, and weekly dances; and soon the club was the center of Greenville social life. All of this activity made for a very successful venture and the membership grew. Today Blue Ridge Drive runs through what was once the country club property. The area today is known as "The Historic ns Souci Neighborhood".

Greenville ladies became involved with golf and tennis as well as enjoying the many social aspects of the beautiful clubhouse. Those coming by horse and buggy had their horses fed for \$.25 or \$.50 for an all day feeding. Of course, it wasn't long before the increasing use of motor cars and the construction of the new streetcar line from downtown to North Franklin Street made it quite common to observe golfers with bags and clubs riding the streetcar out to Sans Souci.

The early staff included J. M. Jordan who was the first club manager. Gerald Leary became the first caddie master, and the first golf professional was an Englishman by the name of Gordon Smith. Romney Rector was the first golf course superintendent. Gambling was frowned upon and anyone caught gambling was fined \$10 to \$25 with a second offense resulting in a 60-day suspension from the club. R. Roper Scales introduced occasional cricket games. When Frank Capers became president in 1908 he allowed several members to build vacation cottages on land leased from the club.

Some of the early members of Sans Souci were Gordon Smith, Walter Griffin Senior, Jimmy Mayo, and Lawrence Cothran. The first club tournament played at San Souci was in 1905 and was won by Charles S. Webb, a Greenville business leader and future mayor. Afterwards, this trophy became known as the Webb Cup and was played annually for many years. The Smyth Cup and the Capers Cup were annual events that were played early in the club's history. The club championship was the most important event each year, and the early champions included C.S. Webb, L.A. Cothran, W.C. Cothran, Harold Van Zandt, Dr. Wilke Jervey, John Arrington Senior, and John Cushman. Walter Griffin appears to have been the perennial runner up. According to the 1912 handicap records the club had four scratch golfers: C. S. Webb, L.A. Cothran, Dr. Wilke Jervey and J. E. Sirrine.

There were a number of excellent lady golfers such as Mrs. Walter Griffin, Mrs. O.P. Richardson, Mrs. G.K. King, Mrs. R.E. Henry and perhaps the most notable, Eugenia Maxwell Poe. Miss Poe donated the trophy, the Eugenia Poe Cup that was contested for many years. In 1915 the lady golfers joined the Women's Southern Golf Association and records show that Mrs. John Milam, wife of the club secretary manager defeated Mrs. O. P. Richardson to win the 1916 Webb Cup for women

In 1909, Fred Tyler, the Country Club of Charleston chairman of matches, decided to bring in several other clubs for matches in Charleston. He invited teams from Sans Souci, Ridgewood Country Club in Columbia, Yorktown Country Club, and Cape Fear Country Club in Wilmington, North Carolina. Frank Capers, then president of Sans Souci, Dr. Wilkie Jervey and J. E. Sirrine went down to the Lowcountry to represent San Souci. The players had such a wonderful occasion that they gathered together at the Carolina Yacht Club on East Bay to continue the good times. After a couple of cups of cheer the idea of a golfing association composed of clubs from the two Carolinas was born. Frank Capers was elected the first president of the organization named the Carolina Golf Association, which later became the Carolinas Golf Association. Later in the evening Frank Capers rose and proposed Sans Souci to host the first annual championship tournament of the Carolina Golf Association in 1910. Two other clubs in the state were invited to join the Carolina Golf Association the following year, including the Mecklenburg Country Club in Charlotte and Kanuga Lake Country Club in Hendersonville, North Carolina.

The first Carolina Golf Association championship of the Carolinas was played June 16-18, 1910 at San Souci. With most of the golfers staying in the spacious clubhouse, the event turned into a very festive occasion and many lasting relationships were made. Columbia's Berrien Brooks edged out the favorite Fred Laxton of Charlotte's Mecklenburg Country Club. In 2010 the Greenville Country Club invited the original clubs to play in the Sans Souci Centennial celebrating over 100 years of amateur golf competition. A special commemorative medallion was struck and awarded to all of the participants.

San Souci was awarded the host site of the first Carolinas tennis championship for 1911. This annual event became a fixture in Greenville which hosted the tournament over 20 years. Club members Marshall Prevost, L.A. Cothran, and Lawrence Patterson organized the tournament. Club members Edge Beattie and L.A. Cothran won the doubles title with other players such as Marshall Prevost, Coulter Cothran, and-up-and-coming V.M. "Vivian" Manning making a great show.

't is said that in 1914, Dr. Wilkie Jervey, a founding member of Sans

Souci, suffered a leg injury during the Capers Cup. Facing a formidable match against John Milam, Dr. Jervey had a cart made to assist in navigating the rolling hills of the course. George Brunson, editor of the Greenville News volunteered to provide the power and pushed Dr. Jervey and his cart over the course, allowing him to complete the match but losing to Milam. Dr. Jervey received national acclaim for devising the first golf cart in history as reported in the "American Golfer."

J. E. Sirrine was a very successful Greenville engineer in the textile industry. An extremely capable businessman and enthusiastic scratch golfer, Sirrine had the club officially chartered with the State of South Carolina in 1914. By 1917 it became clear to him and many of the other club leaders that they would need to develop a new golf course and locate a first-class professional golfer for the club. Using his connections with Spalding Sporting Goods, Sirrine identified David L. Ferguson, a Scottish pro and hired him to report to Sans Souci in May of 1919. Ferguson was instrumental in setting up a club making shop, organizing a caddie program, arranging games for members and setting up the first junior golf program. His impact on the club members and their sons and daughters is still apparent into the 21st century. Many of the club's best golfers such as Charles Dudley, Heyward Sullivan, Billy Delk, and Marshall Ballantine were tutored by Ferguson. He was the head golf pro at the Greenville Country Club from 1919 until his retirement in 1949.

In January 1913 David Byrd Traxler purchased 369 acres along the unpaved Augusta Road that had been in Townsend Smith's family since 1862. The problem Traxler had was the acreage was still farmland three miles outside of town with no water, sewerage or paved roads. In order to attract people to move to his proposed Traxler Park he proposed a golf course and a country club as a centerpiece for his development. In 1917 he offered to donate 150 acres along Byrd Boulevard for the construction of a country club, if the club members would maintain the property for at least 13 years. The club paid Traxler \$10 and promised to spend \$30,000 building a new facility. J. E. Sirrine had his engineering firm design a new clubhouse and Sirrine hired Yale graduate, William B. Langford to design and build the golf course. The new club officially opened on 4 July 1923 with a clubhouse, an 18-hole golf course, ~~four~~ clay tennis courts, and a swimming pool.



The new club house on Byrd Boulevard

In 1927 the club officially changed its name from the Sans Souci Country Club to the Greenville Country Club. The years from 1928 to 1940 were very difficult times for the country club. Many members resigned in the winter and rejoined the club in the summer. Without the exceptionally deep pockets and generosity of J.E. Sirrine, the club could not have stayed open. Every year he would get with the club secretary and see what the shortfall was and write a check to cover it. It was not until World War II and the opening of the club to the officers at Donaldson Air Force Base, coupled with slot machines in the bar, did the club start to regain financial stability and repay Mr. Sirrine.

In 1939 the clubhouse underwent a complete refurbishing that updated the ballroom and introduced the circus bar and expanded the dining hall on a porch overlooking the tennis courts. By the early 1950s it was clear that the clubhouse could no longer meet the needs of the members and a new 19,000- square-foot clubhouse, a swimming pool, and a pool house were built in 1954.

In 1956 the club was able to buy an additional 60 acres across the Reedy River and expand the Riverside course. In 1962 the club added seven new holes across the Reedy River. Concurrently a new tennis facility was built and gradually expanded over the years to 17 courts, making it one of the finest tennis programs in the entire South.



The 1954 club house

In early 1969 the club entered into competitive swimming in the SAIL program, which has grown over the years into a major attraction for young swimmers. In the late 1960s it also became clear that the club either needed to move and expand again or develop a second golf course. Led by Heyward Sullivan, the club contacted Robert Trent Jones, America's most famous golf designer, who suggested a second course. The Chanticleer course located about 10 minutes from the main clubhouse was designed by Robert Trent Jones and opened for play in the 1970s. By 1973 Chanticleer was rated by Golf Digest as one of the top 100 courses in the United States. It has been designated by the Robert Trent Jones Society as one of the top 10 Robert Trent Jones courses in the world. This is out of the over 400 golf courses which he designed. In 2001 Rees Jones, son of the original course designer, Robert Trent Jones, rebuilt and refreshed the Chanticleer course.

In 2005 the board of governors made plans to redesign the Riverside home course and selected Mr. Brian Silva as the architect. The Riverside course was officially reopened in 2007 with its emphasis on being a traditional golf course. It has rapidly become a favorite of the members who have the choice of a traditional course or the championship Chanticleer course.

From the period of early 2000 to 2012 the Greenville Country Club invested over \$10 million in improvements to both golf courses, and its world-class tennis facilities. The club has expanded its junior golf program from 50 young players to over 250, thus continuing the tradition of being a family oriented club. With a total membership of around 1100 of whom 100 are social members, having tee and court times is not a

problem. During a period of economic downturn beginning in 2008, the club has remained essentially debt-free due to superb leadership. The Greenville Country Club is the oldest and most tradition-rich country club in the Upcountry with a history back to 1895. A family oriented club, its marvelous condition and superb facilities are a direct effort of the dedicated work of its member-run Board of Governors, committees, and professional staff currently led by Mr. Greg Hobbs, General Manager.

The majority of information in this short summary of the Greenville Country Club history has been researched, provided and developed by Mr. Tom Finley, the club historian. A detailed history of the Greenville Country Club is expected to be finished and published in 2013. The club owes a great vote of thanks and appreciation to Mr. Finley for his dedication to the history of the Greenville Country Club.