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May 9, 2016

Lincoln Park a historic area course, mostly because golfers still enjoy it

By Bob Silbernagel



The clubhouse at Lincoln Park as it appeared in the 1940s. Special to the Sentinel / Ken McGechie

Staff

Ninety years ago — on May 19, 1926 — the Grand Junction City Council heeded the request of a number of its citizens and purchased 40 acres immediately to the east of Lincoln Park.

The council paid \$6,900 for the property, and according to The Daily Sentinel, that was "considerably under the price asked a few weeks ago."

The new acquisition would become the foundation of the city's first municipal golf course, Lincoln Park Golf Course, an inexpensive home for those who wanted to spend time on the links. Annual memberships that year cost \$25, and the fee for a round of golf was 50 cents.

Lincoln Park's nine-hole course wasn't the first in Colorado. That honor went to a course in Denver established in 1881, the same year Grand Junction was settled. Glenwood Springs is believed to have had the first golf course on the Western Slope, operated by the Hotel Colorado.

Lincoln Park's course wasn't even the first one in Mesa County. There was already a golf course on the Redlands, The Grand Junction Country Club, built in 1921 and 1922, according to a history of local golf compiled by Ken McGechie of Grand Junction.

Amazingly, there was also a golf course in Mack, the Uintah Golf and Country Club, built in 1922-23. "People in Grand Junction used to take the train to Mack, play a round of golf, play some tennis, have dinner and then return," McGechie said.

But the country clubs were too expensive for the average folks of Grand Junction. So, in 1924, several citizens began petitioning the City Council to build a municipal golf course where those less well-heeled could enjoy the game.

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A course adjacent to Lincoln Park — which then housed the county fairgrounds, a zoo, baseball field and Moyer Pool — seemed like an ideal location.

The city purchased the vacant, sagebrush covered land, then extended both Gunnison and North avenues eastward to border the course. There was, at the time, no Veterans Administration Hospital, no Teller Arms shopping center, and no houses at the eastern end of the property to limit the course.

There also was no grass.

When Mayor J.E. Bell drove the first golf ball to officially open the course in October 1926, he did so from a sand tee box, driving onto a clay fairway and aiming for a sand-covered green. In fact, the opening of the course was delayed several times because a wet summer and early fall made the course too muddy to play.

Over the next few years, the city changed the sand greens to cottonseed hulls, which reportedly played better than sand. Grass was gradually planted on the fairways, but it did not come quickly. A 1932 article in the Sentinel said the fairways on holes four and five were grass, and the city hoped to plant several more that year.

Even so, the same article noted that the golf course was "the only city recreational project that has been self-supporting." It was hoped that the addition of more grass for fairways would increase the number of golfers, and thus the revenue from the course.

Golfers in those early years had to put up with some inconveniences. Like baseball.

When the Lincoln Park course opened, the first tee was near first base on the baseball diamond that was aligned much like the current one at Suplizio Field. When baseball games were being played, golfers were instructed to carry their balls approximately 150 yards to the east, then drop a ball, and play the rest of the first hole from there, McGechie said.

A similar problem existed for the eighth and ninth holes, which encroached on part of the outfield. Even after the course was realigned in the 1930s, there was still some overlap with the baseball diamond. That remained until the early 1950s, even though more property to the east was purchased in 1934. That land would eventually allow another realignment of the course and end the interference with the baseball fields.

The first official golf tournament was played at Lincoln Park in 1927, but the Rocky Mountain Open didn't arrive until 1939. Famed Olympic athlete-turned-golfer Babe Didrikson Zaharias and her husband, George, reportedly played in the Open in the 1950s.

The original golf course had no clubhouse, only a starter's shack near the first tee. A wooden clubhouse, complete with lockers and showers, was built in 1929. It stood on the same site as the current rock clubhouse, which was built by the Civilian Conservation Corps beginning in 1935.

One of several CCC camps in Mesa County during the Great Depression was located on land to the east of the golf course, where the VA Hospital now stands. The hospital was built after World War II.

The first golf pros for Lincoln Park were hired in 1930, when Alex Hutton and Eddie Morrison assumed the duties jointly, with Morrison also spending time at the Glenwood Springs golf course.

But Alex McCafferty, who also served as a golf pro in Glenwood Springs, may have served as a part-time pro at Lincoln Park as early as 1928.

Ken McGechie started playing golf at Lincoln Park as a youngster in the late 1950s. He later became involved with the Rocky Mountain Open and has continued to be involved as a rules official at that tournament and others around Colorado.

Along the way, he also gathered information on the history of Lincoln Park and other golf courses in Mesa County.

From what he compiled, it's evident Lincoln Park's golf course wasn't the first one in Mesa County or this region. But it is the only one of those early courses, including the one in Glenwood Springs, that is still operating today.

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Information for this article came from Ken McGechie, the city of Grand Junction and the Museum.

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