

South Tahoe golf course – oldest in the basin



Bijou Golf Course opened in the 1920s. Today a mix of locals and tourists play the 9-hole course. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

While modern golf dates to the Middle Ages in Scotland, Tahoe's links history isn't quite 100 years old.

"There were kids around in the neighborhood who would get odd jobs as caddies. I did that. One time I caddied for Max Baer the fighter. He trained in the summertime with Mr. Goldman at Al Tahoe," Knox Johnson told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The 88-year-old Johnson grew up on the course, but said he was never much of a golfer. Instead, he and his friends would find errant golf balls. On occasion they'd hit balls on the ninth hole after everyone had gone home.

It was the 1920s when the Bijou Golf Course first opened on land owned by Johnson's parents – Knox William Johnson and Stella (Van Dyke) Johnson. Virgil Gilcrease of San Leandro leased the land from the Johnsons and operated the course.

Johnson and South Lake Tahoe officials say Bijou is the oldest golf course in the Lake Tahoe Basin. He believes Brockway is the second oldest and Glenbrook third.

“When it first opened there was just sand greens,” Johnson said. “The clubhouse was right where it is now.”

At the time there were living quarters above the clubhouse.

This was at a time when his family was running cattle and owned much of the land in that area. He still owns 5 acres by the clubhouse, including a house his mother had built in the 1940s. It has a view of Freel, including the No. 27 that the snow makes on the peak. “It’s our lucky number,” Johnson said.

The Bijou area was the hub of South Lake Tahoe and the place to be. Most summer nights there was a dance at Bal Bijou – at what is now the CVS drug store.

Johnson, along with his brother, Bill, and sister, Marjorie Springmeyer – who are both still alive – had to raise some money after their mother died. That is when the city of South Lake Tahoe bought the land where the golf course still resides.

Johnson says it was the late 1950s that the city took over the course. The city says it was November 1983.

He said there was talk of extending the course beyond the cemetery – other land that once belonged to the Johnsons – to make it an 18-hole course, but that never materialized. Instead, the 9-hole course remains much the way it did nearly a century ago.

“They used to irrigate it with ditches,” Johnson said. It was after World War II that the first sprinkling system was put in.

“The pipes that they used came from Perkins where steam engines were. This is where they redid the boilers for trains.

They salvaged pipe from there," Johnson explained.

Then it became possible to water the greens and some of the fairways.

In 1991, the city put in a modern irrigation system.

Today, the city continues to operate Bijou Golf Course.