

WEST AUSTIN ICON

Austin's Munny might be civil rights landmark

Lions was the first verifiably, fully desegregated municipal course south of the Mason-Dixon line, one expert concludes.

By [Kevin Robbins](#)

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A couple of months ago, a few friends with a fondness for Lions Municipal Golf Course casually began to explore whether Lions was the first municipal course in Texas to integrate the races. Layer after layer, the evidence revealed a far more stunning conclusion.

Lions could be the first verifiable desegregated municipal course south of the Mason-Dixon Line.

That research from the past could affect the future of the West Austin golf course, which is on land owned by the University of Texas System. UT regents are exploring new ways to use the property, which has spurred community efforts to try to preserve the 80-year-old golf course.

Advocates for the course will appear at Lions today to add the land's historical significance to their list of reasons to save the course.

City records suggest that Lions allowed African Americans to play without limits as early as 1951, when two black youths were left undisturbed as they walked the public golf course — long before Oliver Brown petitioned the Topeka Board of Education and Rosa Parks refused to surrender her seat on a bus in Alabama.

Until the new information about Lions was found, the earliest documented full desegregation of a Southern municipal course occurred in winter 1955 after a lawsuit brought by black golfers in Atlanta reached the U.S. Supreme Court and forever integrated golf courses in that city.

Other Southern courses permitted African Americans to play for abbreviated periods or on certain days; black caddies, for instance, were allowed to play on days that some country clubs were closed.

But Bob Ozer, Ken Tiemann and General Marshall of Austin say oral histories and City Council minutes that they have assembled show Lions to be the first documented case of African Americans having unfettered access to city golf in a sport long seen as a stubborn bastion of exclusion.

"The city was forward. It was far ahead of other cities," said Marshall, a lifelong resident of Austin.

A University of Miami scholar who researches the integration of golf courses has validated the evidence.

"It's not one piece of evidence that one can single out," said Marvin Dawkins, the Miami sociologist. "It's the corroboration of the pieces of evidence."

Dawkins was unaware of Lions until the sleuthing by the amateur researchers in Austin. They found an oral history on file at the Austin History Center recounted by Taylor Glass, the mayor of Austin in 1951. In the transcript of the interview, Glass said he remembered getting a telephone call about two black youths playing golf at Lions in 1951.

"This was before there was any mixing of the races in restaurants, schools or anywhere," Glass recalled in the interview, dated May 23, 1974.

"I don't see why it ought to bother anybody out there, and I'm for leaving them alone and not even calling the newspaper and see what happens," the oral history continues. "We went on and (let) them play and never heard a word."

Until now, Austin's city courses were thought to have been integrated in 1959. But longtime black players at Lions such as Marshall remembered seeing African Americans from other cities coming to Lions earlier than that year to play.

Marshall, a retired professor at Huston-Tillotson University, played his first round at Lions in the late 1950s, when he was a student at Morehouse College in Atlanta. But he caddied at Lions as a 10-year-old who walked in the late 1940s from his home in the Clarksville neighborhood to tote bags for 85 cents a round.

"There were a number of white caddies, too. But they could play," Marshall recalled.

The Lions research could create a new dynamic in the dispute about the Brackenridge tract, 346 university-owned acres along Lake Austin Boulevard that include the golf course.

Save Muny, a group of residents pushing to preserve the municipal golf course, plans to pursue a historical designation for Lions, including the possibility that it is eligible to become a National Historic Landmark. Such a distinction might further the group's effort to save Lions from development. A planning firm hired by UT System regents to recommend the best uses for the land will divulge its early ideas Nov. 3. Those ideas could include redevelopment of the entire tract.

"At this point, they're going to reserve comment," Matt Flores, a spokesman for the regents, said of Lions' historical claims. "These are things that Cooper, Robertson (the planning firm) certainly will be taking into account."

The research into the desegregation of Lions started with Save Muny. Its members wanted to certify Lions as the first desegregated course in Texas as a way of furthering their campaign. Their work produced far more than they expected or hoped.

In addition to Glass' oral history, the research produced minutes from City Council meetings in summer 1951 that show that the council approved the construction of a \$2,999 "lounge" at Lions. Newspaper accounts of the meeting called the structure a "Negro lounge," but the minutes do not include that description.

The research also included minutes of council meetings in January 1951, when the mayor suggested that the city build a nine-hole golf course in East Austin specifically for African Americans, a Jim Crow-influenced idea that was never realized. According to the minutes, Council Member Emma Long replied "that with other needs in east Austin, a golf course would be too expensive now, and that there were two golf courses already in existence."

"I thought it was unnecessary and said so," Long, now 96, said Wednesday.

Long said she remembers no controversy, deliberation or even awareness among council members that the city was formally desegregating a golf course. Lions was already desegregated, Long said. The city saw no need for a law or proclamation, she said.

After Ozer and the others involved in the research found the evidence that Lions had been integrated long before they had thought, they contacted Dawkins, the Miami sociologist. Dawkins, who co-wrote a book published in 2000 called "African American Golfers During the Jim Crow Era," reviewed the evidence.

He said last week that it "clearly established" that Lions was the first recorded municipal course in the South to allow black players to play without limitation.

Dawkins said he planned to attend a public unveiling of the research at 2 p.m. today at Lions. A golf outing sponsored by the Austin branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Texas Civil Rights Project, Huston-Tillotson University and some churches will follow.

"This discovery represents a need for a corrective" addition to the official history of the desegregation of American golf, Dawkins said.

Nelson Linder, the president of the local branch of the NAACP, agreed that the research casts a new light on a page in American history. "It's very significant," he said.

But he added that Austin was still a segregated city with segregated schools at the time.

"Let's give it credit," Linder said. "But let's not ignore that the city of Austin had a lot more battles going on at the time."

Many American cities did, especially those in the South. Northern cities such as Chicago, New York, Philadelphia and Washington built separate golf courses for African Americans long before 1951. They integrated other courses earlier, too.

In the South, some courses allowed black golfers to play on special occasions or on designated days. Dawkins draws a distinction between those courses and the desegregation of Lions.

Dawkins said the integration of Lions probably happened in the spirit of the landmark Supreme Court case involving Houston postal worker Heman Sweatt and his effort to be admitted to UT's law school. The court ruled in favor of Sweatt in 1950.

Dawkins said he believes "it was in the context of Sweatt that led the policymakers (in Austin) to say, 'Let's let them play.' "

Save Muny members see opportunity in the research.

"I would hope UT sees a great opportunity to get on board and preserve" Lions, said Tiemann, an advertising salesman who lives in the Tarrytown neighborhood that surrounds Lions.

Tiemann said that as a boy, he walked the forested golf course with his grandfather, hunting for arrowheads. "It holds a special place in my heart because of that."

He got involved in the desegregation research after a summer event at Lions to raise money and awareness for Save Muny. That's where he heard that Lions might be the first municipal course in Texas to integrate. At the Austin History Center, he found newspaper clippings, oral histories and council minutes that, stitched together, told a story that he had never heard.

"It all ties in," Tiemann said.

Lions was more than he imagined: "The birthplace of equal-access golf in the South."

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Ralph Barrera
AMERICAN-STATESMAN

General Marshall says research shows Lions integrated in the early '50s.



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General Marshall, a retired Huston-Tillotson University professor, is among those pushing to preserve Lions Municipal Golf Course. Though the course was thought to have been integrated in 1959, he said he remembers African Americans from other cities coming to play the course earlier than that.

