

*16th Green and Charlotte Harbor
Gasparilla Inn Golf Course
Boca Grande, Gasparilla Island
Photo by Daniel Zelazek*

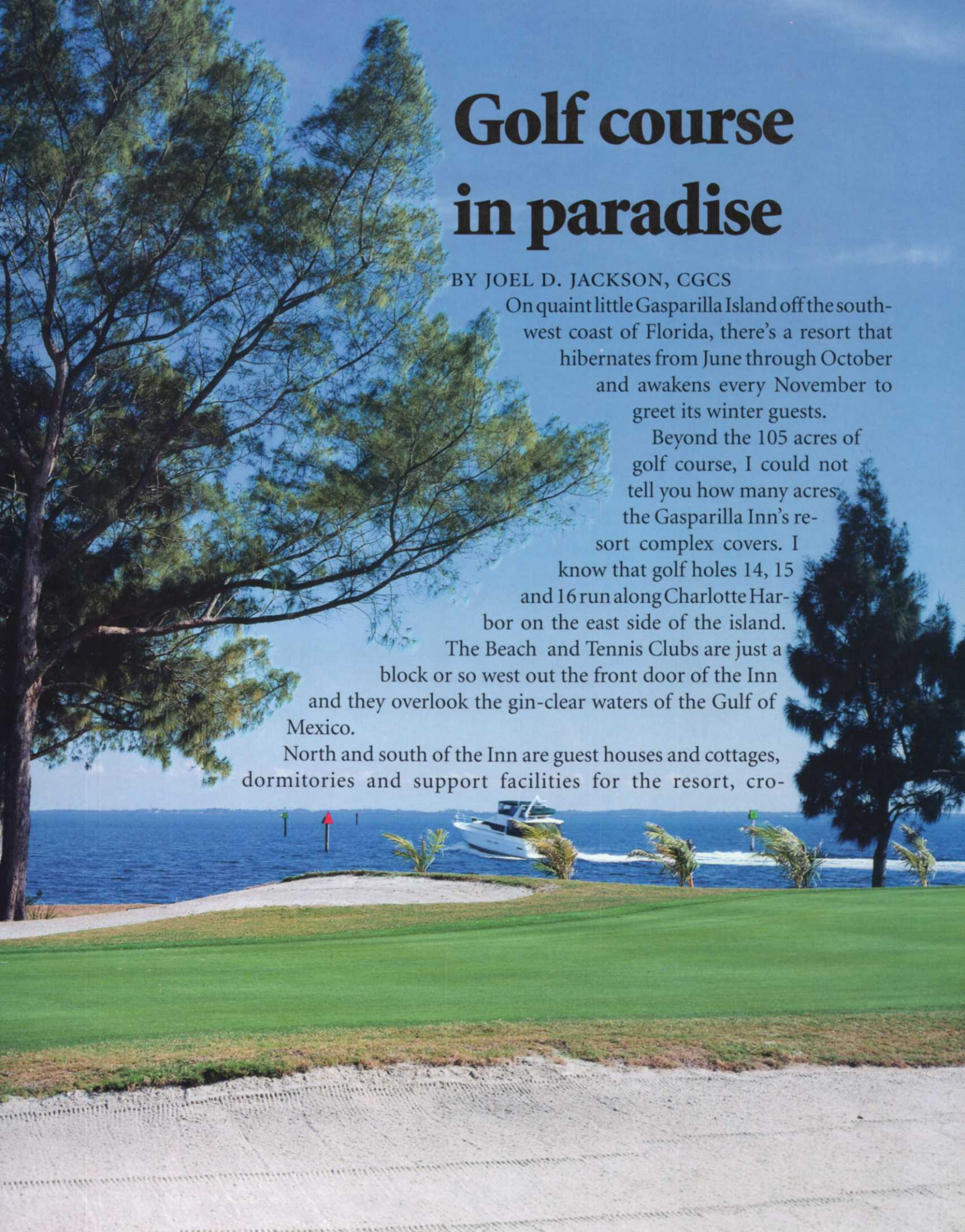
Golf course in paradise

BY JOEL D. JACKSON, CGCS

On quaint little Gasparilla Island off the southwest coast of Florida, there's a resort that hibernates from June through October and awakens every November to greet its winter guests.

Beyond the 105 acres of golf course, I could not tell you how many acres the Gasparilla Inn's resort complex covers. I know that golf holes 14, 15 and 16 run along Charlotte Harbor on the east side of the island. The Beach and Tennis Clubs are just a block or so west out the front door of the Inn and they overlook the gin-clear waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

North and south of the Inn are guest houses and cottages, dormitories and support facilities for the resort, cro-



Island Charm



Photo by Joel Jackson

The restored train depot, formerly the arrival point for vacationing gentry, is now the hub of a quaint downtown area of shops and restaurants.

quet courts, a marina, a restaurant, and a motel all belonging to the Gasparilla Inn.

Two blocks south of the Inn on the main road is the official "downtown" of the city of Boca Grande with a few stores and shops. A gas station, a clinic and some eclectic restaurants with names like: The Loose Caboose; Loon On A Limb; and The Temptation round out the "downtown" area. The Inn has its own restaurant across the street called, The Pink Elephant. The locals just call it "The Pink."

This geography lesson is necessary to understand the range and scope of the responsibilities of the superintendent, Royce Stewart. If the Inn owns it and it has turf, trees, ornamentals or annuals, then Royce and his 18-person staff take care of it!

Royce's staff level stays constant all year while the Inn fluctuates from a small skeleton staff in the summer to a maximum of 225 people during peak season. While the head chef, a 25-year veteran and has a home locally, most of the staff works at jobs or hotels in North Carolina, New York and Maine in the



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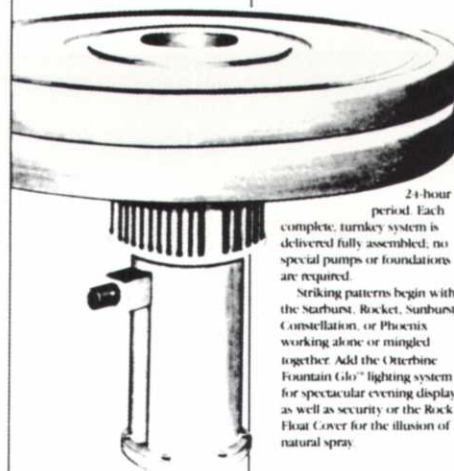
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From behind the 15th green. The majority of the course's layout lies between Boca Grande Bayou by the pro shop and Charlotte Harbor seen to the right.

Island Charm



Photo by David Bailey

Boca Grande Light used to guide phosphate barges to the natural deep water harbor at the southern tip of the island.

summer and here at the Inn in the winter.

Many of them, like the chef, are 25- to 29-year veterans. There are five dormitory buildings on the property to provide housing for the hotel staff. Royce has a two-bedroom, two-bath apartment just a pitching wedge from his office.

I know someone is saying, "That's living on the job! That's not for me!"

There are compensations.

Housing is provided and the area is one of the premiere fishing grounds in the state. Boca Grande Pass is famous for its tarpon fishing. Royce has caught a 140 pounder and his son, Jamie landed a trophy silver king of 186 pounds after an hour long battle and a close encounter with a large hammerhead shark.

Remember, the course is closed from June 15th to November 1st.

There's plenty of time to do projects like: rebuilding small tees to provide more teeing area to overcome winter wear; recontouring a green or two to have more pin positions; planting trees;

Royce Stewart

Originally from: Lakeland, Florida.

Family: Royce, Jr. (27), Jason (25) and Jamie (22).

Education: Lakeland High School, Kansas Junior College, Florida Southern College.

Employment: Superintendent of: Gasparilla Inn Golf Club, Boca Grande (1990-present); Imperial Lakes C.C., Lakeland (1983-1990); El Conquistador C.C., Bradenton (1977-1983); Seminole Lake C.C., Seminole (1970-1977). Manager of Skyview Lakes G.C., Lakeland (1966-1969).

Hobbies/Interests: Golf, fishing, baseball, football.

Professional affiliations/Honors: Member of Suncoast Chapter of FGCSA, Florida Turfgrass Association and Golf Course Superintendents Association of America.

Former positions: Board of Directors, West Coast GCSA; Vice President, Suncoast GCSA; Chairman Membership Drive, FTGA. Received 1995 FGCSA Presidents Award.

Memorable moments: My most memorable moments would have to be the three visits to the Gasparilla Inn by President Bush. Getting to meet him and to witness all the security measures was really extraordinary.

Personal philosophy: Be dedicated to your career but take time to enjoy life as well. If you do a good job with your career, that will make life more enjoyable in itself.

Introduction to the business: Strange as it may sound, I married into the business. My father-in-law, Jamie Jackson, was a golf professional and vice president of the PGA. He asked me to go to work for

him at Skyview Lakes G.C. in Lakeland and my career developed from there.

Mentors: My life and career have been influenced primarily by two individuals. Jamie Jackson, my father-in-law, and Jack Harrell, Sr. of Harrell's Turf Supplies. I will always be thankful for Jamie's encouragement and help to get started in golf course maintenance. Jack has been and continues to be a personal friend and professional mentor. Whenever I have a problem or dilemma, Jack is the first person I call because of the wise counsel I always receive from him.

Advice: Get a good education. Work hard. Seek advice and ask questions



when you have a problem. Sometimes you get into more trouble by not asking for help. Be sure to maintain your course to fit your general membership. Know what conditions they want and then manage the turf accordingly.

Island Charm



Photo by Joel Jackson

Boca Grande Theater. In days gone by, it was a sawdust-floored movie and live performance theater; now it's a restaurant.

removing exotics, like the infamous Melaluca; and replenishing the crushed-shell cart paths.

There are scores of other landscaping projects scattered over the Inn's property to keep Royce and his crew busy all summer. On my visit, Royce had a contractor putting the finish grading on the completely rebuilt driving range.

The Gasparilla Inn was built in 1913 and the golf course was built in 1927. At that time the complex was owned by Baron Collier. The original course was a 9-hole layout. A second 9 holes was built "in-house" sometime later. The designers or creators are unknown.

The current owner, Mr. Bayard Sharp, purchased the property in 1975 and has made numerous improvements to the course over the years. Most notably for Royce, a new maintenance building finished last year. In turn, Royce converted

Gasparilla Inn

Location: Boca Grande, Florida on Gasparilla Island.

Ownership: Mr. Bayard Sharp

Playing Policy: Private. Members and hotel guests.

Management Team: Club President, Mr. Bayard Sharp; Club Manager, Mr. Steve Sidensticker; Head Golf Professional, Bob Kinard.

Opened: 1927. Designer unknown.

Major renovations: 1986-87 rebuilt greens with Tifgreen 328 and installed a new irrigation system; 1993 rebuilt tees; 1994 new maintenance facility; 1995 rebuilding range and replacing irrigation system.

Acreage: Total turf = 105 acres. Ponds and waterways = 4 acres.

Greens: 3 acres (including 3 croquet courts). Average size = 5,000 square feet. Turf type = Tifton 328. HOC = 3/16" summer. 5/

32"-1/8" winter. Green speed goal = 7.5. Overseeding = 4 pounds Cobra bent and 6 pounds Sabre Poa trivialis per 1,000 square feet.

Tees: 2 acres, Tifway 419. HOC = 1/4". Overseeding = Gator ryegrass at 24 pounds per 1,000 square feet.

Fairways: 35 acres, mix of Common, Ormond, and Tifway 419 bermudagrasses. HOC = 5/8" year round. Overseeding = Gator ryegrass at 425 pounds per acre.

Fair-roughs: 20 acres, same turf mix as fairways. HOC = 1.25". No overseeding. Deep roughs = 2". No overseeding.

Irrigation Source: Effluent. Equipment: Pumps = 2-60 hp mains & 1-30 hp jockey. Controls = 48 Toro VT12 satellites. Heads = Double row Toro 670's.

Staff: Total of 19 including superintendent.



Unusual conditions:

Coastal barrier island. Tidal salt water ponds. Salt water intrusion into soil profile. Soil = muck over oyster shell. Permitting required to prune mangroves as needed. Course closed annually from June 15th to November 1st. Weight restrictions on bridge requires special trucking and stockpiling of materials.

Grow-in: When the course was built in the 1920's, the primary equipment was a mule and buggy team.

Mowing/maintenance equipment: Green, tee

and approach mowers = 5 Toro triplexes. Fairways = 2 John Deere 3235's. Roughs = 2 Toro Grounds Masters.

Cultural/Pest Control/

Fertility programs: Frequent verti-drain aerification of fairways. Annual gypsum applications at 1,500 pounds per acre for high sodium levels. Use slow release Polyon fertilizers. Pest control spraying only as needed.

Wildlife inventory includes:

Bald eagles, Osprey (nesting platform on #13 tee), waterfowl and wading birds, Wild turkeys and raccoons.

Island Charm



Banyan Street is one of the most popular photo opportunities the downtown area

Photo by Joel Jackson

the old maintenance site into a pitch and run practice green area with a comfort station complete with porch and chairs.

The golf course is unique for its historical preservation of some local dwellings. The pro shop is an old three-story beach house complete with a widow's walk tower on the top floor.

The second-story apartment served as quarters for one of only five superintendents the golf course has ever had. A gazebo was very tastefully added in 1990 to create a porch and snack bar area. Barged up from Useppa Island in 1930, this old beach house now dominates the golf course skyline.

Just north of the main hotel building is the Croquet Club. The small building that serves as the clubhouse is another old home from the area.

Royce said, "Every year around mid-January, the Inn hosts a week-long cro-



Photo by Daniel Zelazek

This is the range and scope of the responsibilities of Royce Stewart: If the Inn owns it and it has turf, trees, ornamentals or annuals, then Royce and his 18-person staff take care of it!



All photos on these two pages by Joel Jackson except photo of Inn at upper left.



quet tournament with participants coming from all over the United States. It is one of the big events on the island. These folks are pretty intense competitors, so we maintain our three croquet courts just like our greens. The only difference is that I overseeded the greens with a bent/poa mix and this year I'm trying rye on the courts."

The last of the preserved dwellings is a fisherman's house from Placida, the closest mainland town. Relocated and refurbished, the small building now serves as a comfort station in the northeast corner of the golf course. Of course, there's the Inn itself. It's only a paltry 84 years young! A grand dame of traditions, elegance, and style.

There is a price to pay for living and working in paradise.

Gasparilla Island is seven miles long and maybe a quarter mile wide. Like most barrier islands, it is susceptible to storm surges from hurricanes and other severe tropical storms.

1995 was bad enough for the Gasparilla Inn Golf Course with a summer of record rainfall. Royce reported over 68 inches in a 16-week period.

Then Hurricane Opal added more insult to injury. The hurricane's winds



pushed water up Charlotte Harbor and flooded low lying areas, like the fairways, with salt water. The battering winds and waves caused severe shoreline erosion along the bay side holes and nearly 30 to 40 newly planted Malaysian coconut palms were lost. The remainder had to be pulled out of the ground and stockpiled for replanting or suffer the same fate.

It doesn't take a hurricane to inundate the fairways. Any strong storm coming from the wrong direction combined with a flood tide and a good rain can cause flooding.

Royce said, "These fairways are built out of muck that was barged over from the mainland when the course was built long ago. I dug down through the muck once and hit oyster shells.

"Obviously, they have trouble draining! I have verti-drained the worst ones

The cypress knee tee marker and the crushed shell cart path are old traditions at the Gasparilla Inn G.C. The "Apple Barrel" on the ninth tee is a new one discovered at a North Carolina club by the General Manager, Steve Sidensticker.

Photos by Joel Jackson

several times, and we got some good turf growth. The hurricane set us back a little on those holes. Without a doubt this has been the toughest course I've ever managed because of the possible extreme conditions. Because of the frequent salt water flooding, I apply 1,500 pounds of gypsum per acre annually to help neutralize the sodium content."

On the one hand, there's been too much water lately. However, there are times when the irrigation water supply becomes critical on Gasparilla Island.

Royce uses reclaimed water for his irrigation source. With only 500 island residents from late spring to late fall providing effluent, there are times when the fairways can only be watered once every three weeks in order to have water for the greens and tees.

During the peak winter season, the population swells to 1,500 to 2,000 inhabitants and shortages are not as frequent. In mid-November, Royce was having to watch his watering schedule closely to have enough effluent to give his two-week old overseeding a nine-minute syringe.

That brings up another idiosyncrasy of living on a sleepy little island. The toll bridge is only rated for 20 tons. No large trucks allowed.

Royce has an agreement with a local contractor to stockpile his topdressing and other bulk materials on the main-

land at Placida, and then he has them trucked over in smaller loads.

Bulk fertilizer orders have to be divided and delivered in small trucks as well. The toll to the island is \$3.20. Royce and all of his employees have an annual \$35 toll pass that the Inn buys for each person. It is a \$700 line-item in his budget.

For all of the built-in challenges that come with the territory, one of the biggest adjustments Royce had to make was to the island lifestyle.

Royce said, "It has taken me awhile to learn that while the expectations for quality and excellence are the same here as anywhere in our business, the sense of urgency is not as acute. The pace is more relaxed as evidenced by our closed season.

"Even in the winter season, you don't know that the island is busy except when you go to the post office or a restaurant for dinner. Our busiest days on the course will see 130 to 140 players.

"There are no tee times! People come out and just find an open hole if the first tee is backed up! It is the way the members want it.

"I have developed a good comfort level with the unique nature of this position. About the time I get tired of the more intense golf schedule in the winter, along comes our summer projects to focus on. Then after the long hot summer, it's good

to see the members, guests and hotel staff come back again. It really helps to break up the year."

Three visits by President George Bush *really* helped to break up the routine and Royce ranks them among the top highlights of his career.

"The security measures were just unbelievable," he said! "They made the air space over the island off limits to all aircraft. They had a Coast Guard cutter stationed out front of the home where he stayed. They even had Navy Seals in the water between the cutter and the shore.

"He would arrive by helicopter and land on the fourth and fifth fairways. Sharpshooters would be stationed on the top floor of the pro shop building. While he played golf, the Secret Service would keep two station wagons loaded with enough armament for a small army in our maintenance compound. They let us look inside once. It was absolutely amazing!"

"Mr. Bush's routine usually consisted of jogging the perimeter of the course every morning and then spending half a day playing golf with Mrs. Bush and the other half fishing.

"When he jogged, there was a group of agents all around him and advance and rear guards as well. Two of his visits were while he was in office.

"The last one was after he left office. Then he only had four agents guarding



This grove of palms behind #16 green literally had to be rescued from Hurricane Opal. The area where Royce is standing was eroded away by the storm surge. Note the high shell content of the soil.

Photo by Joel Jackson



Friends and neighbors



Dinner Time



Defending the homestead



Family portrait

him. We had a 'no carts allowed' restriction one day so he just slung his golf bag over his shoulder and walked the course.

"I got to meet him and have my picture taken with him. It was definitely a rare and unusual experience for a golf course superintendent!"

Gasparilla Island has a long and rich history from Spanish exploration in the

1600's to American presidential visits in the 1900's. It has remained largely undeveloped commercially over the years. The old buildings and the golf course are being renovated to preserve the traditional and quiet ambience of the island.

For Royce Stewart, the Gasparilla Inn Golf Course is a unique management opportunity and the place he calls home.

Meanwhile, back at the rookery...

David Bailey focuses his camera on a Great Blue Heron family in a rookery at the Gasparilla Inn G.C. and captures some scenes from a day in the life of wildlife on a Florida golf course.