

Golf has inspired inventors who

'Pop' Erswell, a father of invention, pioneer in clubs and carts

By Vern Putney

The bottom (water) line of golf ball retrieval is big bucks.

An estimated 50 million errant shots fired around the United States sink into mud, but not to a watery grave.

Sophisticated machines, along with trained divers, rescue most of these misfired balls — to be sold, resold and played again, and again, and again.

In fact, a recycled ball may have up to 16 lives before fading away on the driving range.

And what about the course revenue of the past 40 years in golf carts, for those who like to walk and don't like the rental price?

What and where were the humble beginnings of these moneymakers?

The answers may be wrapped up in one man — Charles S. "Pop" Erswell, of Brunswick, Maine.

Erswell was known to have carried in his oversized bag as early as 1919 a wooden stick with an evaporated milk can nailed onto it. That crude but effective device was his retriever should a shot stray into a pond.

Erswell was more widely known for inventing the golf cart. In the early-to-mid-1900s, 20 years before the 14-club rule went into effect, Erswell often jammed more than 20 clubs into his bag. Caddies gave him a wide berth.

Ex-boxer Erswell counter-punched. While the winter of 1916 held Maine in its icy grip, Pop stripped his son's bicycle, had an axle forged for the wheels, cut some half-inch water pipe for a frame and came up with the first caddie cart.

Erswell thought he might patent the contraption, but never got around to it.

When World War I hit and caddies vanished, some smart operator pushed the carts into mass production, sold them in gross lots for about \$20 apiece and cleaned up.



Pop Erswell, left, and Ernest Randall check a new wood in about 1935. In foreground is a refinement of Erswell's 1915 golf cart, with pockets for clubs.

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Lyman Beecher's revolutionary golf cart.

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Golf meant more than money to Beecher, Erswell

Lyman Beecher and Charles S. Erswell had in common a long, full life and a failure to patent golf car and golf cart inventions that would have made them millionaires.

Beecher, who in 1935 reportedly invented a vehicle considered the forerunner of today's sleek player and club carriers, died in Clearwater, Fla., at age 102.

Erswell, said to have devised in 1916 the club carrier which transferred the bag from the player's shoulder to wheels for easier transport, died in 1968 at age 104.

Beecher's son, George, said his father hit upon the idea because his legs were giving out and he wanted to prolong his golf days.

His first effort at his home Biltmore Forest Country Club in Asheville, N.C., resembled a rickshaw and required two caddies to pull it.

Biltmore is very hilly, and caddies didn't care for the uphill haul. They finally balked at such "de-meaning" (and demanding) duty.

The electrical engineer next tried a gas-powered cart. This didn't work out because, even with a muffler, it was too noisy.

Finally, Beecher devised a homemade, three-wheeled car powered by storage batteries.

George once told the Florida Times-Union, Jacksonville, Fla.: "He never patented the cart. He always

said he would rather play golf than get involved in the rigmarole of marketing the cart."

The car served Beecher well until one day in 1960, when he was in his mid-80s.

He was on the 9th hole, coming in to wait out a shower, and somehow ran the car into a sand trap.

The cart tipped over and Beecher broke his arm. His doctor advised him to quit golf, and he did. But he always was interested in the sport. He often said there was nothing he'd rather do than play golf.

When he moved to Florida some years later, Beecher brought along his cart. Somehow, it disappeared and, with it, a valuable bit of golf history.