

Sarasota not only has the nation's best supply of golf courses, it also had the first!

Bless you, John Hamilton!

BY
BILL CAREY

New York columnist supported Florida's claim in 1935

Speculation was rampant in the national press about who really was first. Joe Williams, a sturdy practitioner of the sportswriter's craft, moved the question center stage on March 21, 1935, in a column he wrote for the *New York World-Telegram*:

The Yonkers adventure is, of course, completely authentic, but if any historian wishes to wager this club was the first to re-echo the piteous cry of, 'Boy, my niblick, please!' he should proceed with great caution and frugality. To come right out and say so, he should keep his money in his pocket.

Yonkers just wasn't the first golf club in America. The Sarasota Golf Club preceded Yonkers by at least two years. For some strange reason, this interesting historical item has just been brought to light. There is indisputable evidence that golf was played here (in Sarasota) in 1886. The widow of the man who built the course is still alive to confirm the facts.

She is Mrs. J. Hamilton Gillespie, a gracious lady who lives here in an attractive home. Her husband — very probably the father of American golf — died on a golf course here 12 years ago.

From scrubby beginnings, golf in Florida has blossomed into a multi-billion dollar business.

And isn't it interesting that the place where it all began now is recognized as the best-supplied market in the nation for public golf facilities.

Remarkable!

The man who started it all, a feisty Scot land developer named John Hamilton Gillespie, loved the game and had the vision to play it anywhere. Which explains why, in May 1886, in Sarasota,

Florida — a little fishing village, then part of Manatee County, on the Gulf of Mexico south of

Tampa — Gillespie hacked out the first two golf holes in Florida.

Pristine meadowland, surrounded by native palmetto scrub and pine trees, provided an idyllic setting for the introduction of the hallowed game to the new Sunshine State.

"Twa holes f'r practice an' they can be extended later," was the way Gillespie described them to friends.

Although well documented as Florida's first golf holes, there always remained the question, "Were they the first in the nation?"

In the annals of the U.S. game, five holes at Yonkers, NY, constructed in February 1888 by John Reid, another Scot, have been officially ranked first because the club has continued in operation since inception.

Reid creatively named his club St. Andrews, which sealed the deal for golf historians. The Yonkers location was a centerpiece of the American Centen-

nial of the game observed during 1988.

On May 8, 1939 — 53 years after Gillespie's holes opened for a short few year's play — the local *Sarasota Herald* newspaper published a special Golf News edition. A bold headline on the front page screamed: "SARASOTA BIRTHPLACE OF U.S. GOLF."

Gillespie, himself, wrote very informative articles about the state of the game for publication in the U.S. and Great Britain. His pieces reminisced about the early days of golf in Edinburgh and St. Andrews in his native Scotland. He went into great detail to explain how the great players of the day employed their special shots for repeated victories, the changes in equipment and social structure which provided women more liberal use of golf courses.

His papers and diaries touched on legendary reports of golf in the 1780s at Harleston Green in Charleston, S.C. There was no hard evidence, however, to prove the golf club was anything but a place for social gatherings. No golf holes ever were documented and certainly women weren't making inroads into the game.

Gillespie's action in Sarasota 103 years ago gave Florida a head start in a game which has developed into the state's major non-polluting industry. According to a recent National Golf Foundation study commissioned by the state's Department of Commerce, golf is very big business, expected to contribute an estimated \$5.2 billion to the state's economy in 1989.

The crowning jewel in the Gillespie legacy, however, as we enter the second century of golf in Florida, is that Sarasota, where the game began, leads the nation in providing public golf courses for residents and visitors. Sarasota County is Number One in the country on a list of the 10 best-supplied metro areas for public golf (See sidebar elsewhere), according to another NGF study. Sarasota is far in the lead offering an 18-hole golf course for every 715 players.

Gillespie the Scot and his golf, like the amber flow of another smooth export of his native land, gain favor with the passage of time.

Bless you, John Hamilton.

Bill Carey was executive director of the Florida State Golf Association for 24 years and a USGA committeeman for about the same period.