



Dewey Brown: First African-American PGA Professional

An unwavering love for the game propelled Brown through turbulent times

By Tony L. Starks

Dewey Brown became a member of the PGA of America in 1928. Twenty-nine at the time, and working at what is presently The Shawnee Inn & Golf Resort in Delaware, he was well known for his golf skills and southern gentleman temperament. History, however, recognizes him in a more profound way – as the first African-American PGA Professional.

In 1934, Brown’s tenure as a PGA Professional was cut short when the Association implemented the Caucasian-Only Clause – forbidding individuals of African, Native American, Asian or Latino descent from joining the ranks of the PGA of America.

ing it, because black people in the area knew who he was. It was more a case of people’s assumptions, opposed to him intentionally passing himself off as white to the PGA.”

However, Brown may have realized his career was at stake if his racial background were discovered. A story passed down through his family says that when he competed in tournaments, his son would caddie for him. Brown’s son was more noticeably African American than his father, and thus he was not allowed to address him as “father” or “dad” during competition to conceal the truth about Brown’s race.

It is speculated that in late 1933, the PGA was made aware of Brown’s racial identity. Coincidentally, the Caucasian-Only Clause legitimized the removal of Brown’s membership.

Humble Beginnings

Yet, Brown’s keen interest in the game of golf began well before those tough years. Born in North Carolina as the son of two southerners, Brown’s mother and father were fine dressers and took pride in how they looked – a trait they passed on to their son. His family was better off than most blacks of the time, as indicated by the fact that they were landowners in a southern state. It’s likely that Brown’s polished upbringing was a major factor in his success in the golf industry.

When Dewey was a child, his family made the decision to move to the affluent area of Morris County, New Jersey, where his father again purchased land for the purpose of dairy farming. Newly minted to the north, Brown began working at Madison Golf Club as a caddie where he was introduced to the game that would change his life.

It was the liberal friendship of the club’s Scottish

“The legacy of Dewey Brown and his place in golf history is very special.”

— Bob Booth, PGA

Dewey Brown (center) stands at Cedar River Golf Course in the late 1960s with his son, Roland Brown Sr. (right), and blues musician William “Sweet Willie” Brown (left, no relation).

As historians and Brown’s relatives tell the story, Dewey was a fair-skinned black man and was able to avoid racial discrimination when he initially became a PGA Member. Essentially, during a time of accepted racial division, Dewey was able to pass for white and go relatively undetected in Caucasian circles.

“When he joined the PGA, from what we know, the issue of race never came up because people just assumed that he was white,” says Malakhi Simmons, Brown’s great grandson. “It wasn’t that he was hid-

Dewey Brown, always a fine dresser, purchased Cedar River Golf Club and the adjoining Cedar River House Hotel in 1947. He owned and operated the property until his passing in 1973.

golf professionals who taught him the game and its Rules, plus how to make clubs, that put him on a path to be successful in golf.

Pursuing a Passion

That path would prove tumultuous for Brown, but he never waived, even after his expulsion from the PGA of America made it difficult to find sustainable work.

“You see in writing that he was a gentleman of the fairways. He was a gentleman before any-



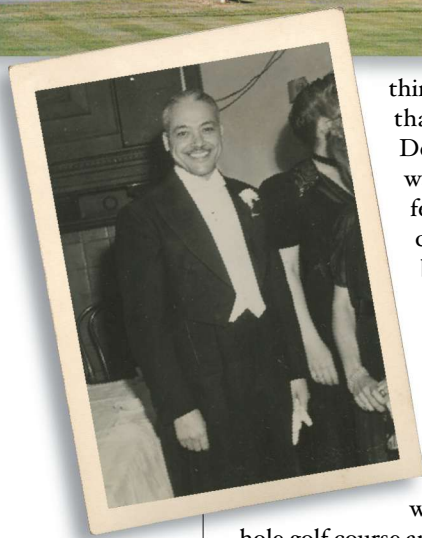
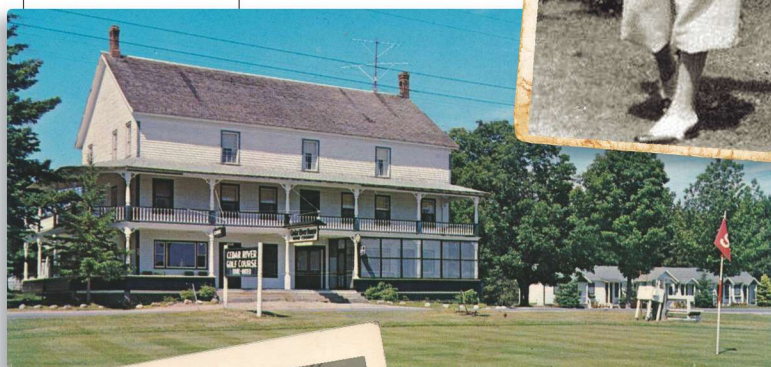
until he passed away in 1973. In fact, he was buried in the green jacket and tan pants combination that's still associated with GCSAA members. According to GCSAA Director of Communications

Craig Smith, Brown is also believed to be the first African-American member of the GCSAA.

“One of my favorite stories that my grandfather told me is that when he attended GCSAA meetings, other members would bring him brown paper bags with patches of bent grass so he could plant them on his greens, which helped him have nine of the nicest little greens in the Adirondacks,” says Roland Brown Jr. “The GCSAA was wonderful to him, and a great outlet.”

In addition to being a knowledgeable greenskeeper, Brown also became an established and sought after club builder. He even crafted golf clubs for President Warren G. Harding. The Harding Home & Memorial in Marion, Ohio, is currently working with Brown's family in an effort to identify the exact clubs Dewey made for the 29th President.

“Every golfer has benefitted from the first person to play golf, or the person who invented the golf tee, or created a new way to design clubs, or engineered a new turfgrass for greens,” says Simmons. “All these things are a part of today's game and it's history. Each player, each PGA Member in particular, is connected to every member who has ever lived and contributed to the Association. That's why my family, and many others, believe it's so important for Dewey Brown's story to be told.”



thing else and was recognized for that,” says Roland Brown Jr., Dewey's grandson. “As such, he was hired quite often to fill professional vacancies and voids at clubs around New Jersey, but because he was black it was only temporary.”

Unable to find a long-term employment solution because of his race, Brown took matters into his own hands. In 1947, using his savings and some of his family's accrued wealth, Brown purchased a nine-hole golf course and a small hotel in the center of the Adirondacks—Cedar River Golf Course. Brown bought the property, which was originally a stagecoach stop and farmlands, from the Indian Lake CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps).

“Cedar River was his love,” says his grandson, who as a child, along with his sister Gloria Brown-Simmons, would work at the course with Dewey during summer months. “I started as a dishwasher, and as I aged I improved my position. I went to bus boy, then waiter, then bartender. In the off hours, I had a little boat and would float up and down the river fishing out golf balls at the fifth and ninth holes.”

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The President's Clubmaker

In 1957, Dewey Brown gained membership into the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America and enjoyed a great relationship with the GCSAA

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— Roland Brown Jr., grandson
of Dewey Brown**

In 1961, the PGA revoked the Caucasian-Only Clause and four years later, Brown was reinstated as a PGA Professional. “The legacy of Dewey Brown and his place in golf history is very special,” says Bob Booth, the present-day PGA Head Professional at the Cedar River facility Brown founded. “I take pride in my position at Cedar River, the heritage of the club and the strides the PGA has taken over the years.” ■

Editor's note: *PGA Magazine* would like to thank those who shared information about Dewey Brown for this story — Arthur Bartlett, living relative of Dewey Brown; Bob Booth, PGA Head Professional, Cedar River Golf Course; Roland Brown Jr., grandson of Dewey Brown; Gloria Brown-Simmons, granddaughter of Dewey Brown; Bob Denney, PGA of America, Historian; Dr. Jeffrey Sammons, PhD. Professor of History, New York University; Malakhi Simmons, great grandson of Dewey Brown; Craig Smith, Golf Course Superintendent Association of America, Director of Communications.