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FOREST LAKE: EXCLUSIVE AND EXCLUSIONARY
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On a drizzly Friday afternoon, Chip Clary, the president of Forest Lake Club, wandered through the clubhouse, greeting fellow members who had arrived early for dinner.

The clubhouse overlooks an 18-hole golf course and a picturesque lake. The simple but elegant furnishings exude the calculated restraint of old money.

The country club, which occupies 125 acres in a wealthy enclave of Forest Acres, is arguably the Midlands' most exclusive.

Its membership includes bankers, doctors, lawyers and politicians. Most prominent among them, perhaps, is William "Hootie" Johnson, chairman of Augusta National Golf Club.

Membership at Forest Lake is capped at about 1,100, and the waiting list to join runs nearly 10 years, Clary said.

Forest Lake Club also distinguishes itself from area country clubs in another respect.

Nearly 80 years after it was founded - as a "country club of white membership," according to its deed - Forest Lake Club has yet to admit a black member.

Long after public segregation was struck down by the nation's courts, country clubs offered legal venues for white exclusivity. But over time, many such clubs succumbed to public pressure and integrated. Augusta National, home of April's Masters, admitted its first black member in 1990. (It has yet to admit a woman, however.)

In the Midlands, public pressure in the 1980s prompted many of the most prominent clubs - Spring Valley Country Club, WildeWood Country Club, the Summit Club- to recruit black members.

After snubbing the Jewish commander of Fort Jackson in 1984, Forest Lake has admitted Jewish members in recent years. But there are no African-Americans - not even on the waiting list, Clary said.

For Clary, the absence of African-Americans has nothing to do with club policy, which "does not discriminate in regards to race, creed or country."

For critics, that Forest Lake has no African-American members speaks for itself.

"Positive change has always come slow in South Carolina, and race still rules as it always had," said Lonnie Randolph, president of the S.C. NAACP. "And that's the case with Forest Lake. It's the prima donna of white supremacy."

'A COUNTRY CLUB OF WHITE MEMBERSHIP'

On March 14, 1925, the Forest Lake Co. leased in perpetuity 125 acres from the Cooper Land and Investment Co.

The terms of the lease were generous for the club: \$1 a year and a modest annual fee per club member, ranging from \$6 to \$10, which the club still pays.

"I wish he would have driven a tougher bargain," Forest Land Co. of Columbia Inc. president Edwin Cooper Jr. said of his uncle, John Hughes Cooper, who signed the deed. (Forest Lake's land subsequently was folded into Edwin Cooper's company; the annual fee now goes to the Forest Lake

Property Owners Association.)

But the deed was less generous in another respect; Forest Lake Club only could be used by whites or the land would revert to its owners.

"This conveyance is made subject to the express condition that the land hereby conveyed shall be forever used, kept up and maintained exclusively as and for the purpose of a country club of white membership," the deed stipulates.

Edwin Cooper declined to discuss the racial component of the deed, but experts agree such restrictions no longer are binding.

"Since 1948, it's been clear in the courts that racial covenants on land can't be enforced," USC law professor Robert Wilcox said.

In the landmark 1948 case of *Shelley v. Kraemer*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that, under the 14th Amendment, courts could not enforce deeds that prohibit sales of houses to minorities. The ruling, by extension, applied to restrictions at clubs like Forest Lake.

Forest Lake members point to the date of the whites-only deed and say it does not reflect the club's current practices.

"The Supreme Court held - I forget the name of the case - that these racial provisions are invalid," said George Shissias, the club's general manager from 1959 to 2000. "So it's wrong to look at our deed and say we discriminate; these things were fairly common at the time."

USC law professor Eldon Wedlock Jr. sketched the likely scenario in the event of a legal challenge to prevent an African-American from joining Forest Lake.

"Say a black applicant was accepted to Forest Lake. Someone would have to sue to prevent," he said. "Then, the courts would say, based on precedent, 'We can't enforce racially restrictive covenants,' and the member couldn't be kicked out."

Wedlock's scenario is hypothetical. According to Forest Lake members, no African-American has ever been nominated to join the club.

'CONTRARY TO WHAT OUR NATION STANDS FOR'

The specific details of how a member joins Forest Lake Club are a closely held secret, but club members offered a general picture.

First, a would-be member must be sponsored by current members. Then, he or she-"The club has always had women members," Shissias said - must be approved by the club's membership committee.

If the nomination is approved, there's still a long wait - up to 10 years - until a membership is made available. Often, the wait is reduced for members' family members who wish to join, Shissias said. For many years, Forest Lake Club made other exceptions to its normal procedures for membership. For example, the club offered honorary memberships to commanders of the Army's nearby Fort Jackson.

"I was invited to join, and I accepted," said retired Lt. Gen. Bruce Blount, fort commander from 1977 to 1979.

But the tradition ended in 1984, when Maj. Gen. Robert Solomon was assigned to the fort. Solomon was Jewish.

"I felt anger," said Solomon, recalling the snub in a 1997 interview, a year before he died. "And that is something I still feel.

"I have some pity for those who, for whatever reason, hold views that are contrary to what our nation stands for."

To longtime Jewish residents of Columbia, the snub was no surprise.

Growing up in Columbia, Eleanor Niestat said, she was aware of the club's discriminatory policies. "I knew what the club was about and did not feel comfortable going there," said the chairwoman of the Columbia Jewish Federation's community relations committee. "My husband and I have gone to several weddings where the receptions were held at Forest Lake, and we did not attend."

According to Shissias, general manager at the time, religion had nothing to do with the club's decision not to extend Solomon an invitation.

"There's a great misunderstanding about that," he said. "We actually stopped extending complimentary memberships when (Dick) Riley was elected governor" in 1978.

"Riley declined the invitation, and, at that point, we decided it wasn't a good idea to continue them if it was going to become political."

Riley couldn't recall whether he was extended an invitation. But the former U.S. secretary of education said he would have refused a membership if offered.

"It was my policy, across the board, to decline invitations from discriminatory institutions," he said. As proof that discrimination was not behind the Solomon decision, Shissias said the club "didn't give an invitation to the general before Solomon, either."

But the general who preceded Solomon, retired Maj. Gen. Albert Akers, said he was extended an invitation.

"I was invited, joined, played golf and won," Akers, Fort Jackson's commander from 1981 to 1984, said in a telephone interview from his Virginia home.

Told of Akers' remarks, Shissias said, "Riley was a two-term governor, and I'm certain the club stopped extending honorary memberships during his time in office, though maybe not right after he was elected."

Solomon left Fort Jackson in 1987. He retired to Columbia and on his death, in 1998, the General Assembly commended him for being "extremely active in the civic community."

OPENING DOORS ELSEWHERE

The Solomon affair only turned brief attention to the discriminatory practices of Columbia country clubs.

In part, that was because Solomon played down the incident.

But the issue resurfaced - more publicly and bitterly - after IBM sent Charles Savage, an African-American, to his native state as its top representative in 1985.

Spring Valley Country Club was among several prestigious clubs that refused Savage a membership. (Savage was not nominated for membership at Forest Lake, members said.)

Meanwhile, his family complained of mistreatment.

In 1987, Savage asked for and received a transfer from South Carolina.

Some Midlands residents - recalling the Solomon affair - were outraged by the clubs' discrimination.

"This is not a legal issue like school desegregation or voting, but it is no less a moral issue," one Episcopal leader wrote in a church monthly. "Racial and religious discrimination by private clubs may be a legal right. For Christians, it can never be a moral choice."

As public pressure mounted, most of the Midlands' exclusive clubs began recruiting African-American members.

In 1987, following Savage's departure, the state Senate passed a rule prohibiting the legislative body from holding official functions at any club that discriminated. That same year, the Summit

Club, a business dining club, asked three African-Americans to join. Also in 1987, WildeWood Country Club admitted banker T.R. McConnell as its first African-American member.

The following year, in an open rebuke to Columbia's discriminatory clubs, several prominent businessmen founded the biracial Capital City Club.

In 1990, Union Camp Corp. executive Ronald Burton broke the color barrier at Spring Valley Country Club.

At the Palmetto Club, Columbia's oldest, an African-American member was first admitted in "the 1980s," general manager Georgia Cooper said. In 1987, The Columbia Record, a now-defunct afternoon newspaper, reported a state Chamber of Commerce reception at the club had been canceled because of "complaints about its all-white membership."

"I really had no personal desire to join any of these clubs," said former Richland 1 superintendent John Stevenson, one of the first African-Americans invited to join the Summit Club. "These exclusive clubs were by no means the worst discrimination blacks had suffered, but they were still a sore spot. If you're told you can't do something, it rankles."

Stevenson said he joined the Summit Club to "open the way for others and make it more palatable for blacks to belong to these traditionally white clubs."

CHANGES AT FOREST LAKE

Unlike other clubs, Forest Lake Club has not sought out African-American members, Clary said. But, in recent years the club has extended membership to Jews.

After beginning the membership process in 1996, surgeon Donen Davis joined the club four years later.

Davis said his membership demonstrated the club - like the state - had changed.

"I remember (former NBA star) Alex English lived in WildeWood but couldn't use the club there. I think that really typified the times when I was growing up," Davis said.

Before he joined, Davis said, he had concerns about how he would be treated at Forest Lake.

"When they interviewed me, these issues were on my mind," he said. "But they said they wanted to become more diverse, and I thought they were sincere, and I've never had any reason to doubt that."

Other members also say the club is changing.

"For many years, the club had practices that were not in synch with an increasingly tolerant society," said Gaston Fairey, a Columbia attorney who started going to Forest Lake in the 1950s with his parents and joined himself in 1976. "But, in the last 15 years, you've seen blacks come as guests for lunch."

'I HAVE NO OPINION ABOUT THAT'

Forest Lake's critics say until the club admits an African-American as a member - not just a guest - it will continue to be associated with discrimination.

"If they felt like opening up their doors, they would actually recruit black members like other clubs have done," the NAACP's Randolph said.

Counters Clary, "We don't recruit."

To bypass the club's membership process to add minorities would devalue Forest Lake, former general manager Shissias said.

"Once you change the system, put in shortcuts and make exceptions, then you lose prestige," he said.

Randolph said "prestige" is a euphemism for "whites-only."

"They say they don't recruit," he said. "Well, they recruit blacks for cooking and cleaning. It's that old plantation mentality."

Asked whether the club would admit black members in the near future, Fairey replied, "I certainly hope so."

Richland County Auditor Harry Huntley, a 20-year member, added, "If there are some members who feel strongly about nominating someone, then I hope it wouldn't make a difference about their skin color."

Neither Fairey nor Huntley has ever tried to sponsor an African-American applicant, and the expressed hopes of a few members might not be enough to overcome the ambivalence of club leaders.

On that gloomy Friday afternoon at Forest Lake Club, Clary paused for several seconds when asked whether he'd like to see an African-American join the club under his leadership.

"I have no opinion about that," he said.

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