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ON THE TOWN

A Tilting Windmill

Miniature golf, once all the rage around L.A., may have just run its course.

By BRENDA REES, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Golf's Scottish forefathers surely had no idea their noble creation would one day mutate into a maddening miniature experience complete with Day-Glo windmills, fluorescent blue waterfalls and fairways covered with a strange green fabric.

Thus is the legacy of miniature golf, a "racy" amusement in the 1930s, resurrected in the 1950s as the wacky fantasy sport, and one that continues to putter along in the 21st century.

Although Los Angeles has played a part in the development of the game, it's unfortunate that many of the great miniature golf courses in the Southland have gone the way of another West Coast creation practically laid to rest--the drive-in theater.

"Miniature golf courses are totally disposable, throwaway recreational environments," laments Charles Phoenix, author of numerous books on 1950s Southern California. "They really are the forgotten stepchild of kitsch culture. We haven't done enough to document them, especially here in Los Angeles."

Los Angeles preservation consultant John English also would like to see more attention paid to miniature golf. "We need to identify the ones that are significant and see what we can do to make sure they remain," he says. "What is really mind-boggling is they were all over this city in the 1930s."

Back then, Los Angeles fanatically embraced mini-golf, creating elaborate settings. More than 300 courses could be found in Hollywood alone.

Los Angeles' famed Caliente course was built atop a natural geyser that spewed steam 100 feet in the air. Another local course boasted Chinese dragons and junks floating in water hazards as an eight-piece orchestra played Chinese classical music and jazz.

Hollywood had an Eskimo village replete with blue turf, snow banks and an aurora borealis. Not to be outdone, Altadena's Japanese garden motif had a miniature Mt. Fuji, bridges and shrines.

Hollywood celebrities were drawn to the mini-golfing scene. "Mary Pickford built her own golf course that was done in this modernistic French style with bizarre palm trees and surreal flowers," says Maria Reidelbach, co-author of the book "Miniature Golf" by Abbeville Press.

Movie stars of the day were forbidden by the studios to play or be seen on miniature golf courses, which is why Pickford and also actor Jackie Coogan designed their own, explains Reidelbach. "The movie studios feared the soaring popularity of mini-golf would diminish theater ticket sales," she says. "That's why in movies of that era, you rarely see someone playing mini-golf, despite the fact the courses were *everywhere* in Hollywood."

Indeed, people of all ages, backgrounds and ethnicities flocked to miniature golf courses. It was an activity women could do unescorted, and since courses were open late--some closed at 4 a.m.--it had a risqué nighttime allure.

But interest eventually waned as mini-golf faced legal and civic restrictions. People grew tired of the



Benjamin Tovar and daughter Anessa at Anaheim's Camelot Golfland.

KAREN TAPIA-ANDERSEN / LAT

amusement and went on to other fads. Courses became parking lots and city streets.

But the sport was revitalized in the 1950s, thanks to entrepreneurial folks on the East Coast like Don Clayton, founder of Putt-Putt Golf and Games. Mini-golf became a wholesome, family activity.

"They became mini-amusement parks," says photographer John Margolies, whose quirky pics are included in the "Miniature Golf" book. "Family-valued Mormons played a hand in building Fountain Valley's miniature course," says Margolies, explaining that they wanted a "place kids could go on a safe date."

Mini-golf became larger than life in Southern California due to the freeways. "Owners had to use very large sculptures to appeal to people going 65 mph," says Margolies. "Big castles were positioned prominently on hills."

Mom-and-pop courses flourished for about 10 to 20 years. Exaggeratedly modern, tacky and often handmade, these mini-golf courses contained unique obstacles and challenges, which made Putt-Putt owner Clayton contend that mini-golf was indeed a serious sport. "Our putters are great athletes and men," he once said, which began the contemporary argument: Is miniature golf a game or sport?

But, in the end, the '50s revitalization waned, and with it came the demise of many courses. Today, few mom-and-pop courses survive in Southern California. A remnant of that era is the tiny and unique Arroyo Seco Course in South Pasadena built in 1955. Most miniature golf courses, however, are part of family fun centers, where the soft clunk of a hole-in-one is drowned out by the roar of race cars, batting cages and video arcades.

One quiet course, located in Avalon on Catalina Island, is faced with potential or partial extinction. Golf Gardens, created with bricks and simple materials by owner John Frick, has been pleasing tourists and residents since 1971. But the small city is desperate for a fully functioning grocery store, which may send the wrecking ball to Golf Gardens.

"The future is up in the air," states Paul DeMyer of the Santa Catalina Island Co., which owns most of the land in Avalon. "We have to balance our community needs and are evaluating all our alternatives. But we do recognize the need for green space and the historical significance of the miniature golf course."

Despite course closures, miniature golf probably will be around for quite a while, since longtime course managers say they have a steady business, thanks to teenagers, families and young people looking for alternative amusements.

For many, mini-golf is a great first date. "You can learn a lot about someone's personality by the way they golf," says Jamie Case of Sherman Oaks. "I've done it many times and it's a pretty good method. You can see how smart they are, what upsets them, if they have a good sense of humor."

A comedy writer for radio, Case is a member of a 3-year-old organization, the Professional MiniGolf Assn. (PMGA), which has been holding tournaments nationwide. "Our goal is to emulate the PGA with a Masters and U.S. Open," says president Bob Detwiliger from his office in Florida. "We've been talking to ESPN for tournament coverage too."

So far, no PMGA tournaments have been slated for Southern California--there is one scheduled in Sacramento--but Detwiliger is confident one will happen soon. "We're getting a lot of interest," he says.

The future of miniature golf--as sport and/or recreation--seems to be coasting on a slow bank heading lazily toward a hole hidden beneath a swinging cylinder. Although mini-golf probably never will recapture its glory days, it remains an otherworldly experience.

"It was a great thing to do as a kid on warm Friday nights," sums up author Phoenix. "To me, miniature golf is like stepping into a comic strip or a fantasy land. You can be anyone and go anywhere. I love it."

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Offering the Max in Mini-Golf Fun

Got the urge to frolic in the shade of a mini-golf windmill? Here are some area recommendations.

Arroyo Seco Golf Course--Built in 1955 and constructed with lava rocks and cement blocks, it's the oldest course in town and has only nine holes. The three-level bank shot is a whopper. *1055 Lohman Lane, South Pasadena, (323) 255-1506.*

Boomers Park--The only place in the Southland to mini-golf indoors. Those courses feature a Wild West theme and Middle-earth fantasy. *1500 W. 7th St., Upland, (909) 981-5251.*

Camelot Golfland--The biggest mini-golf spot in Southern California with five courses. Picturesque holes

include shots over a fishing wharf, putting through an Oriental pagoda and by an African village. *3200 E. Carpenter Ave., Anaheim, (714) 630-3340.*

Castle Park--Each of these four courses has different musical accompaniment. Highlights include a Native American village, a haunted house and an old western fort. *3500 Polk St., Riverside, (909) 785-3000.*

Fountain Valley Boomers--California Mission-themed courses as well as European favorites, the Eiffel Tower and Big Ben. *16800 Magnolia St., Fountain Valley, (714) 842-1011.*

Golf Gardens--Hand-made in 1971 with none of the commonplace kitschy statuary. You will encounter complicated obstacles encased in a park-like setting. Watch out for roaming cats. *Island Plaza, Avalon, Catalina Island, (310) 510-1200.*

Golf N' Stuff--A fiberglass hippo and alligator cavort in a pond; a huge elephant sprays water. Putt inside a gold mine cave. *5555 Walker St., Ventura, (805) 644-7148.*

Malibu Castle--Avast ye mateys! Pirate-themed courses with sunken ships and even a water fountain that erupts from a skull on a nearby lake. *2410 Marine Ave., Redondo Beach, (310) 643-5167.*

Sherman Oaks Castle Park--Putt alongside the 405 Freeway near a tiki god that blows mist. Springtime usually brings out early morning rabbits that scurry round the fairways. *4989 Sepulveda Blvd., Sherman Oaks, (818) 756-9459.*

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