



Augusta in Tolar

**Driving, chipping and putting
down the course of history.**

by Courtney Dabney

If you dare set foot on Starr Hollow Ranch, you had better be packin'... good golf clubs, that is. You'll need them, if you plan to make it through the best-rated nine-hole golf course in Texas. There is a good reason this local gem has been nicknamed "Little Augusta," and the rich history of this place will take you longer than just one round to uncover.

Can you keep a secret? If you head toward Granbury on Highway 377, and just keep going, you will come to Tolar, Texas, population 504. Wander down a couple of farm-to-market roads — one named the Tolar Highway — and you will happen upon one of the best-kept secrets in golf.

A lot of pros, self-proclaimed aficionados, and wanna-be's have never even heard of Starr Hollow. But it could be one of the best nine holes you will ever play.

Of course, Tolar is an unlikely locale to plant a golf course of this caliber, and its remoteness just lends to its allure.

Starr Hollow is branded with many such contradictions. This working ranch is just reeking with history. On these grounds, you might trip over the fossilized remains of dinosaurs that once roamed this area or find traces of skirmishes between the Native American tribes who called this place home and the determined settlers who came here to roost.

There are also wild tales of the larger-than-life “Bandit Queen” Belle Starr, who reportedly hid out with her band of outlaws in the caves and ravines on the property. And, on the walls of the modest clubhouse, you will notice photos of famous friends and golfing legends like Ben Hogan who were frequent visitors.

The land known as Starr Hollow was purchased in 1965-66 by one of Fort Worth's original merchandising magnates.

Marvin Leonard (back to camera) speaks to an unidentified man during construction



Marvin Leonard founded Leonard Brothers in downtown Fort Worth in 1918 with brother Green Thomas Leonard. When G.T. left to form his own business, another brother, Obie, joined the enterprise.

Aside from being a hugely successful entrepreneur, Leonard was a noted philanthropist whose guidance helped contribute to the success of, among other things, Lena Pope Home. He was also known as a passionate golfer with his love for his family and his city matched only by his love of the game.

When he bought the ranch, it was known as Star Hollow, with only one “r.” Leonard added the extra “r” in recognition of its infamous, and alleged, resident Belle Starr, the female outlaw, whose legend mushroomed after her mysterious murder near the Oklahoma border in 1889. Her brief resume included associations with the likes of the Younger clan, Jesse James, and the Tom Starr gang.

Her actual “bandit” status may be more myth than reality. But, she was known to sell horses that did not belong to her, and she did spend a little time as the resident of a Detroit prison. So, we can certainly give her credit for being an outlaw of sorts. But it was her gender that made her remarkable in that era. She was once dubbed “the female Jesse James.”

While it is debatable how much of her story has been enlarged by legend, she was undeniably tough enough to survive the company she kept. She was married to the outlaw Jim Reed, lived for a time with the vicious Bruce Younger, and finally married again to American Indian horse thief Sam Starr, from whom she gained her catchy name.

So that is the “Starr” in the name Starr Hollow, and if you've ever seen a grainy photo of the notorious Belle, you might think the “Hollow” is descriptive of the cold and eerie quality of her dark and lifeless eyes. She was one tough broad. The mystery of her burial place is highly speculated, although some claim she may have even been laid to rest somewhere on the ranch.

No matter what, legends beget legends, and Starr Hollow has been host to its fair share over the years: Ben Hogan, Larry Mize, Ben Crenshaw, Mark Brooks and David Duvall, just to name a few.

Leonard embraced Belle's former celebrity in these parts, and was happy to share a bit of his own local celebrity with her.

He added his unique talents to her former hideout

and, along with famed golf course architect, Joe Finger, created an idyllic golf course on the grounds. His love of the game is evidenced in the two Fort Worth courses he founded — Colonial and Shady Oaks.

In 1936, Leonard opened Colonial Golf Club and introduced Texas to its first golf course that featured bent grass greens. Everyone said it couldn't be done in our harsh climate. But he proved that with equal amounts of investment and tenacity, anything was possible. He even secured the prestigious U.S. Open Tournament, held there in 1941 — the first time the tournament was staged in the Southwest or south of the Mason-Dixon Line. Colonial was his private club until 1942 when he sold its shares to the few members he had personally invited to join, officially making it Colonial Country Club.

His later endeavor was also a great success. Marvin Leonard bought the land where he would ultimately build his beloved Shady Oaks in 1955 from the estate of Amon Carter. The land now encompasses both the neighborhoods of Ridgmar and New Westover as well as Ridgmar Mall.

Robert Trent Jones Sr. designed the Shady Oaks course in 1959. This too, remained his private club until 1969, when he sold the club to its members, only one year prior to his death in 1970.

Just as Leonard had been the first to successfully introduce bent grass greens at Colonial, he sodded Shady Oaks with a newly mutated form of bent grass that was even richer and greener. It was named in his honor. When Shady Oaks converted to a newer form of bent, Marty Leonard kept some of the Leonard bent and has it in a small nursery at Starr Hollow.

“Although it has since been replaced with Coore and Crenshaw bent grass, you originally would have found a variety of Leonard bent grass on the course at Shady Oaks,” said Chad English, assistant director of golf at Shady Oaks.

But Marvin Leonard left behind a third great Texas golf course. Though Starr Hollow is obviously lesser known, and at only nine holes, it could easily be considered the runt of the litter, the course was no less cherished and nurtured.

When golf course architect Joe Finger penned his memoirs, *The Four Wise Men and a Golf Course Architect*, he included this account of his initial telephone conversation with Leonard:

“The conversation that night was quite memorable. It opened with, ‘Mr. Finger, my name is Marvin Leonard from Fort Worth. I don't think you've ever heard of me.’

“No, Mr. Leonard, possibly not. Except that you used to be a member of River Crest Country Club in Fort Worth, and decided that you wanted bent grass greens to play on, so you built the Colonial Country Club in Fort Worth, which is still one of the greatest courses in the United States; and while there you developed a strain of bent grass which is superior to Penncross for putting greens in Texas. When you tired of Colonial, you developed Shady Oaks Country Club with 27 holes and Ben Hogan as pro. You're right, Mr. Leonard, I've never heard of you!”

Together the two men collaborated on Starr Hollow's design. Bringing it to completion was an amazing challenge.

Marty Leonard, Marvin's third daughter, now oversees the golf course.



Clockwise: Belle Starr displays matching pistols; Ben Hogan gives Madelon Leonard a few pointers; and Marty Leonard, Scott Dally, author of Starr Hollow & Star Hollow: Mysteries & Memories of a Golf Course and Ranch, and Madelon Leonard Bradshaw.



“It was a pretty rough piece of property when Daddy bought it,” she says. “He purchased it with the express purpose of building a course on it. He was a true visionary. That is how I would describe him. My father could visualize things that no one else could see and then make it happen.”

Starr Hollow Golf Club is located in the middle of a working ranch, another feature that makes it unique. The ranch now encompasses about 4,000 acres, after a recent acquisition of an adjacent 800-acre tract.

The ranching enterprise is overseen by Madelon Bradshaw, Marvin Leonard's youngest daughter, and a rancher herself.

“Daddy was a quiet man and a great observer. He liked to sit back and take everything in, before making his decisions and acting on them,” she says. “I think that is one of the reasons he was so successful and one of his best qualities.”

Madelon reminded me that Starr Hollow Lake, which the course wraps itself around, was the result of damming a 50-foot deep canyon.

“The lake was built to water the golf course,” she said. “It took



Left: Starr Hollow from the air. Below: Marcella Musick Head and stepfather Claude Baker, who was foreman at the ranch in the early 1940s; Bottom: Marty Leonard with Pistol (left) and Belle (right). All photos courtesy of Starr Hollow.



wasn't familiar with the telephone bidding process," she said. "I knew I really wanted it ... to connect her history with ours at Starr Hollow. When the lot finally came up for sale, all I remember was the chaos, and within less than a minute hearing a voice on the other end say 'It's yours.'"

me until the late 1980s to figure out why Daddy built that lake, since he was not a fisherman."

While the 90-acre lake is a breathtaking central feature to the course, it owes its very existence to the fairways and greens that required it.

"They said it would take years to fill up that dry dammed-up creek bed, but one fall, it just took one good rain to do the job," remembers Bradshaw.

Prior to damming up the creek bed and waiting for rain, Marty Leonard explained, "They took loads of the rich bottom land soil that had settled down there, and transported it to help build the course. Daddy used as much of it as he could to save on the expense of hauling all that dirt in. He also tried to employ local Tolar residents as much as he could in the course's construction. He felt a certain affinity with the little town. Some people have joked that if he had lived long enough, he might have bought the town of Tolar itself."

In addition to the Black Angus cattle, the ranch is teeming with wildlife. You might encounter deer, geese, turkeys, or armadillos during your round. But some of the ranch's other residents are less appealing. Along with rattlesnakes and bobcats, there is also a burgeoning feral hog population.

In his book *Star Hollow & Starr Hollow*, author Scott Dally explains, "The pigs have four-inch razor-sharp tusks that can rip you, your cart, your putter and your designer golf outfit into itty-bitty pieces."

The hogs have laid waste to entire fairways and become quite a nuisance. To assure that golfers don't have any unwelcome additions to their foursome, Dally says, "... the entire golf course is now surrounded by a high-powered electric fence."

After your round at Starr Hollow, you can accept your trophy at the clubhouse in the form of one of its famous hamburgers. Each delicious burger is 100 percent homegrown. The beef comes entirely from the cattle raised on the ranch.

Belle Starr's personal shotgun will oversee your meal, as it proudly rests above the fireplace, bought at auction by Marty Leonard.

"Although I had bought plenty of things at auctions before, I

When you tee off at Starr Hollow, you know you are playing one of the greats. And, if you have any experience on one of Marvin Leonard's other Fort Worth courses, you'll feel right at home amongst its oak lined fairways and gently rolling terrain.

Bradshaw holds a special affection for the Starr Hollow course.

"It is Daddy's legacy. It was his last creative endeavor. Building a golf course is a very creative process," she said.

If you want to play there, remember that it is a private course and your best bet to play a round is to buddy up to one of the members. Just don't show up on a Saturday morning and expect to get to play.

Mark Twain once complained, "Golf is a good walk spoiled."

But, not even a tough day on the links could spoil your walk on the course at Starr Hollow. With its scenery so breathtaking, and its course so pristinely manicured, your scorecard may be the last thing on your mind.

