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Boat club like 'Mayberry' on the lake



By Jane Harrison

It's a place where folks cruise their golf carts past the chic lakeside digs of Fortune 500 executives and the most modest abodes of the southern culture. At the Athens Boat Club, off War Hill Park Road, a cloister of unlikely neighbors abide on a 60-acre plot that seems set back to the date of its founding in 1958.

"It's an interesting conglomeration," said Sue Wilson, ABC membership and entertainment chairperson. House trailers and stylish bungalows line streets named Hickory, Dogwood, Cherry and Redbud in the close-knit community that clusters the wealthy and not-so-rich in seeming harmony. "I'm 64 years old, I was raised in the '60s and '70s when people took care of each other ... this is like that. It's like stepping back in time," Wilson said of the 140-member enclave. She and club commodore Carter McEver emphasized that as appealing as their Mayberry on the lake may sound to outsiders, membership is by invitation only and lot leases can only be sold to members. The public's only accesses to the exclusive setting are at the gas docks, now selling Ethanol-free gasoline, and at the come-as-you-are church service in the lakeside pavilion.

McEver believes it's the only community of its kind on the lake. The club has its own water system, 147 boat slips, a book exchange library, and a four-dispenser public gas dock that draws boatloads of families to get lollipops and dog biscuits from ABC's resident cowboy and manager, Jerry Blair. It's a place, Blair said, where instead of slumbering late on

summer mornings, kids rise early to walk to the lake with their fishing poles. People feel really safe here, he said. "There are very wealthy people here, but you never know it. There are poor here, too, but you never know it," Blair said.

Club membership has passed down through generations of families originally linked by Athens Boat Club founder Billy Daniel who in 1955 sought a social club to market his Athens, Ga.-based boat business. Copies of newspaper articles posted on the community house walls relate how a 35 cent ad Daniel placed in the Athens Banner Herald generated interest in a social club formed at Lake Lanier.

Daniel and a brother leased the land from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Wilson said, and people started coming up with their travel trailers for fish camps. Then they started putting porches on the trailers and building vacation cabins and permanent residences. "All of the above are still here," she said.

Members hail from metro Atlanta and a few are from out of state, Wilson said. Before being accepted, prospective members must have the sponsorship of an existing member plus the co-sponsorship of three additional members. Final approval for membership depends on the seven-member board of governors, according to the club's website.

On Sunday mornings between Memorial Day and Labor Day, the community opens its pavilion to folks from around the lake for one-hour lakeside services at 8 a.m. "As a few as 40 and as many as 100" gather in their flip-flops, swim suits and lake duds for an informal, non-doctrinaire service based on pure gospel, said Joe Gaines. The Cornerstone Christian Church associate minister said he offers teaching, not preaching in a gathering that's "not like a normal service." Song leader Travis Gene Smith, an 80-something gospel-troubadour and ABC mainstay, leads a praise session that could raise fish from the water.

The club's social calendar posts family-oriented activities ranging from a July 4 golf cart parade to fish fries, old fashioned game nights with horse shoe contests and "Go Fish" duels, bake offs, a country hoedown and barbecue cook-offs.

"This is lake living at its best," said McEver, who inherited his membership through his father and grandfather, Wylie McEver, from the family that owned farmland on now busy commercial McEver Road in Gainesville and Oakwood. "It's like being on vacation 365 days a year."

Dogs whimper, kids beg for gas dock goodies from ABC's Blair

"People go by here on their boats and their dogs start barking when they pass. So they come in and say 'give the dog the stupid biscuit to shut 'em up.'" Jerry Blair, dispenser of dog biscuits, lollipops, gas, advice, and memories at the Athens Boat Club dock on Lake Lanier recently tried to explain the inexorable interdependence between an "ol' cowboy" from Jackson Hole, an exclusive eclectic boat club, and a lake full of boats toting dogs and children.

The week before the summer mobs hit Memorial Day Weekend, the 13-year manager of Athens Boat Club reflected on the life and times that have made him a “must see” living legend on the lake.

“I’ve been on a bucking horse and bull riding. I’ve battled grizzly bears and I’ve been in stressful situations that in a millisecond decided whether people lived or died ... but I’d never managed a boat club” until Lake Lanier threw him a loop, said the former supervisor for Texaco offshore and inland drilling operations.

“For 37 years, I rode the gauntlet with a major oil corporation. I was looking for something different,” Blair recalled. He had retired, but continued consulting in Dubai and Abu Dhabi when by chance he spied a newspaper ad during a stop over at the Atlanta airport. “It was an ad about a manager for a boat club ... so I came out here out of curiosity,” he said. He took the job that “paid as much in one month as I made in one day” and for the first six months “thought I was the only one speaking English.”

Blair, 66, told his story in his tidy flat just up the hill from the public gas dock and pavilion where his hand-built lighthouse offers a beacon to those hankering for treats, laughs or cowboy wisdom. Relaxing next to his front room bar, Blair mused that the walls adorned with striking photographs of timber wolves and an imposing painting of cowboy boots, images captured by friends out west, may seem “misplaced in Georgia.” He shrugged, “I might be, too.”

But, somehow the desperado seems to have found a niche in a community that “would panic if I left.” The self-described combination of a “man’s man,” ol’ country boy and Barney Fife moaned in his canyon-deep western drawl, “I would not do that to them; I love them all.”

“I needed ABC and what it represented in my life,” he said, slicing through to the core of why he’s corralled himself into the cozy community of chic bungalows and house trailers. He was given the manager’s position after telling interviewers “the first thing I’d do is level half the place and start over.”

He quickly made himself indispensable, repainting buildings, redesigning streets, overseeing the private water system, and gassing up boats. He also built the lighthouse, topping it with a lamp frame from the 1996 Olympic Venue on Lake Lanier. Soon the strong 6’3” wrangler became more than a ranch hand at the boat club. Guided by his mother’s admonition to “make a memory with someone” every day, Blair set out to make his mark in people’s lives. His big attitude helped bridge the social gulf between the cove dwellers and the rest of the compound.

“I created an atmosphere where there once was a dividing line into a loving community that can drive you absolutely crazy with cabin fever,” he said of the close-knit cluster. He became the handyman, dog whisperer, and mediator for the discontented and ailing. He checks out noises in the middle of the night. Folks phone him about chest pains and bleeding. “It becomes a trust you don’t really want ... when they really need to call 911,” he

said.

On a recent afternoon, boat club members called him seeking counsel for health maladies and stopped their golf carts seeking friendly jabber. “We couldn’t fire him, we’re afraid he’d kill us all,” joked Travis Gene Smith, long time resident and self-proclaimed ABC mayor, who crooned gospel lyrics and yet another elegy to his late wife into Blair’s listening ears. “We just love him to death,” said boat club social membership chairperson Sue Wilson. “When the grandkids come, they’ve just got to see Jerry.”

That attraction to the cowboy on the public gas dock draws them in from the water, too. “There’s a cowboy side of me and a BS factor that people come in for ... plus the free advice,” Blair said. His public relations skill and some special treats “take a little of the sting away” from paying nearly \$5 a gallon for gas. “Years ago I started giving kids lollipops. Now, everybody’s got a dog on their boat, so I started giving dog biscuits away, too,” Blair said.

“On a busy holiday weekend people ask me how many gallons of gas I’ve sold,” said the man whose reputation among the younger generation is linked to candy. “I can tell how busy it’s been by how many bags of lollipops I’ve given out” to tots and teens. Kids on pontoon birthday party boats even drop in with their orders: “four orange, four green ... like they’re going to Wal-Mart.”

He reported that a little girl at the grocery store tugged on her mom’s arm after recognizing him in a cowboy hat “looking nothing like I do on the gas dock.” She exclaimed to her mother, “Mom, that’s the lollipop guy!”

If dogs could talk, they’d have their name for him, too. When boats cruise by the ABC dock “dogs bark for dog biscuits and kids cry for the suckers,” said boat club commodore Carter McEver. “So (boaters) say let’s go see Jerry at the gas stop.”

“It’s nice to be needed, nice to be appreciated,” said Blair, without a bit of cowboy swagger. “Sometime today make a memory with someone. That’s what I’m trying to do.”