

THE Island Caddy Hut

Anthony D'Cruz
The SICC Heritage
Chronicles

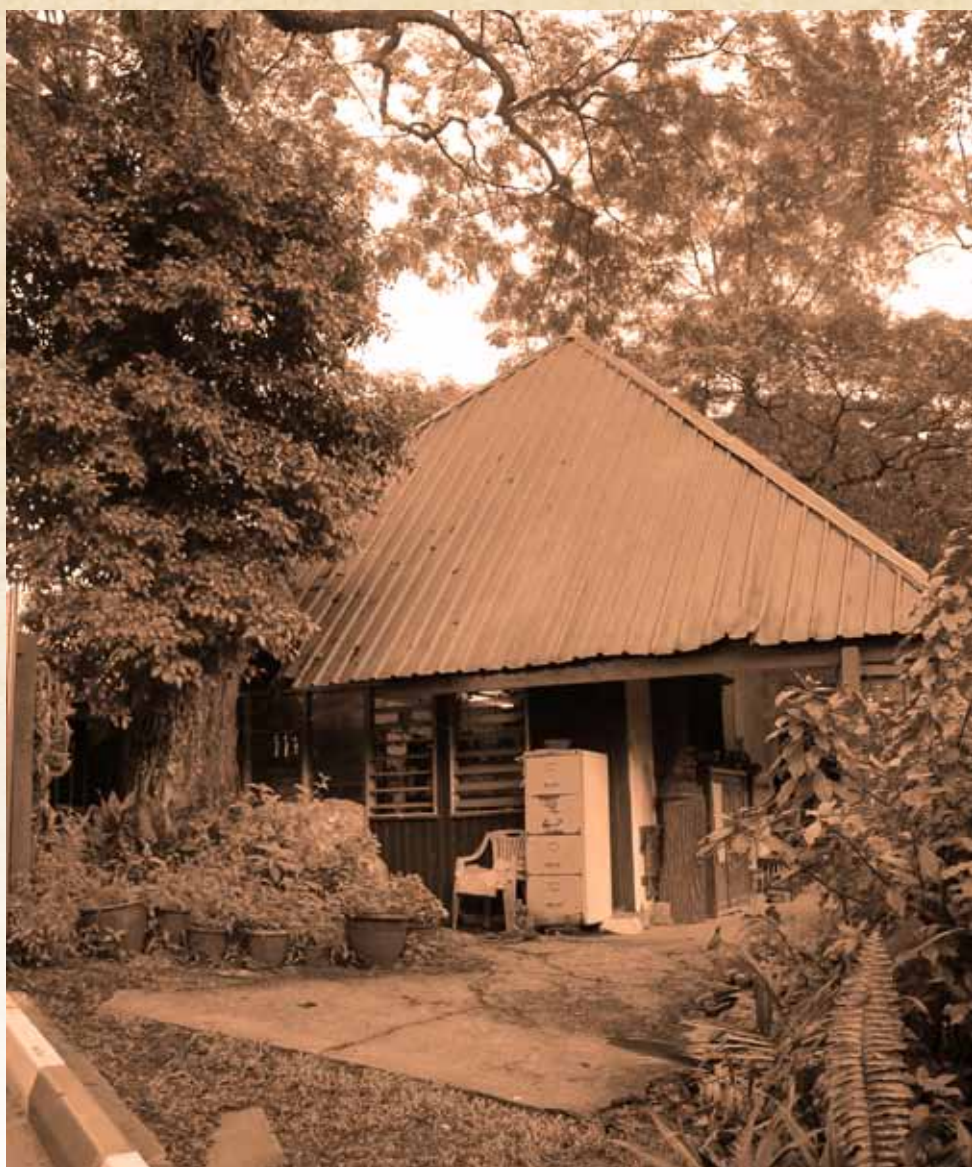


What could this derelict structure mounted on stilts be, you wonder. If in possession of a curious bent of mind, you would then turn left at the Island Club Road and drive up the steep slope towards the Clubhouse. Just beyond the guard house you would see another structure with a zinc side some 25 metres long and the same asbestos roof, and a door in the middle. You might then see an elderly man, wrinkled and stubbled, bent under the weight of a golf bag, emerging from the door and reeling his way towards the 1st or 10th tee of the Old Course. You would then surmise that this had to be the caddy shack of the SICC Island Location.

If while driving from the covered car park towards Island Club Road you were to look to your left and upwards, through the bank of trees that hold up the soil on the steep slope, you will see an asbestos roof overhanging the planked sides of a mysterious building.



Entrance of
Island Caddy
Hut





You are transported back to 60s when you enter the Island Caddy Hut. The trunk of the Bunyan tree is on the extreme right.



Pang Yeng Ee

A General Electric switch that still runs the ceiling fan



But how could this be, you ask yourself. How could this ramshackle structure be the rest house, a place of refuge, rest and relaxation for the caddies of the opulent, prestigious and highly acclaimed SICC? You decide to investigate. You thrust your head through the wooden frame of the open door and you see a concrete floor, not quite as level or smooth as you would wish, with a number of tables spread out, each surrounded by the obligatory stools and rickety chairs as in a food court in a wet market. On the right you see a squatting toilet with the flush chain dangling, and on the left the massive trunk of a mighty bunyan tree thrusting itself through a hole in the roof. At the foot of this sacred tree you see joss sticks, lighted oil lamps and other paraphernalia essential to pay homage to the Almighty.

A group of elderly men with weather-beaten faces are bent over cups of steaming black

coffee. The rest of the room is empty save a lone figure seated separately in front of a TV set, eyes glued to the screen. You approach him. He looks up from his reverie and says, in Hokkien, "Can I help you?"

You are in luck, for you are now face to face with **Pang Yeng Ee**, Caddy Master from 1969-2006, a post now defunct. After exchanging pleasantries, you probe open his bank of memories and he launches into the history of the lives of the caddies in the 1950s up to the present day, and chronicles the events that took place in the structure you are now seated in - the present day caddy hut.

The first caddy hut was situated in the vicinity of the rest stop at the juncture of

the 6th green and 13th tee box of the Old Course, where the original Clubhouse was. When the present Clubhouse, the A-frame building, became the new Clubhouse in 1951, a new caddy hut was erected where the present one stands. It was then a tiny wooden shack with an attap roof, nestled among the trees on the edge of the slope, its presence screened by a cluster of trees from Members who drove past to park their cars. In that bygone era, every player used a caddy, and each player "belonged" to a specific caddy. As a Member drove in, a lookout would identify him and holler towards the shack, "Ah Meng, your man has arrived!" (In Hokkien, of course). Ah Meng would then emerge, abandoning whatever pursuit he was indulged in, in either the shack or in the shade of the surrounding trees, and in bare feet and in shorts, would dash to the car belonging to his man, grab the clubs from the trunk, and skip his way jauntily to the tee box.



Glimpses of days long gone

His day was made, for he was now assured of 75 cents for the day, which would cover most of his needs.

There were approximately 280 to 300 caddies then. So how did such a small attap hut accommodate all of them? Most of them knew when their 'masters' would turn up, and if they had no work for the day, they stayed away. So there would be only about as many caddies present as golfers who would turn up for the day. Of course, some without a booking for the day would still turn up and hope for a lucky break, as when a new Member made his first appearance. Then there would be a rush, and the fortunate caddy who first reached him and grabbed his bag would have found a new employer, and theirs became a permanent relationship. There was an unwritten law that trespassing

was forbidden, and once an attachment was made, it was permanent.

Poh Kim San, entrepreneur and uncle of the famous **Poh brothers**, was the first food and beverage caterer in the new hut. His father was his predecessor who serviced the caddies in the original hut. Kim San's menu was restricted to fried bee hoon, biscuits and buns, and bottled aerated water. The caddies bought these items on credit, which was limited to two dollars, and no more credit was entertained until the sum owed was fully paid up. He also accepted Caddy Service Chits as legal tender and would exchange them for cash with the club cashier. To see three of these young caddies munching on buns and sharing one bottle of drink costing 15 cents was not an unusual sight. When it rained and the course was temporarily closed, Mr Poh would make a killing, for it was difficult for the caddies to pass the time without some munching or sipping to accompany their card games or putting contests. A hole in the mud floor was not difficult to make, and money (or IOUs) would change hands as the putts dropped, or missed.

In 1960, **Norman Sutcliffe**, the then General Manager had the original hut replaced with the present much bigger one with a cement floor and asbestos roofing. A flush toilet and a bathroom were

added, and no more did those desperately seeking relief have to dart into the adjacent grove of trees. But lightning was still a potent danger. In 1980, a bolt of lightning streaked through the roof and felled one of the caddies. A clamour for safety followed and the authorities acquiesced. Lightning conductors became a fixture, and safety from the elements brought forth peace of mind. Of course, leaks in the roof had to be repaired every now and then. Other improvements were made and cast away furniture found its way in, and a modicum of comfort was established. A hole was drilled into the cement floor and putting competitions continued to be the main source of entertainment while waiting for a bag to lug. Sinking a putt on a cement floor, which rolled at least 15 on the stimp metre, must have required quite a bit of skill, or luck.

You venture deeper into the building. To your astonishment you discover that the left portion has been partitioned off and is the home of **Madam Toh Hian** who, for the past 43 years, has been living here and providing cooked food for the club's green keepers, groundsman and other manual workers. The area contiguous to her living quarters where stands two tables is the diner where meals are served. Her son, **Tay Sin Hoon**, raised in the premises, is a buggy steward at the Bukit Location.

Henry Tay, another son, was once a teaching pro at the Toa Payoh range.

You then walk to the right, and there you stumble upon another area partitioned into a spacious coffee-shop like set up. A long table with comfortable chairs, and hot and cold drinks, toast, meat buns and no less than a third generation of the Poh Family to serve you! **Poh Tiam Lai**, Kim San's son, took over from his father in 1971, and plies his trade even today. He pays a monthly rent of \$50, and after three generations of service is filled with trepidation that he will be left high and dry when the bulldozers charge into action. Will his expertise be required to serve the ground staff when the new clubhouse comes into being, he wonders.



Poh Tiam Lai (right) with his wife, has run the caddy coffee shop since 1971

The evolution of the caddy profile into what it is today took place gradually over a period of some sixty years. In the fifties and sixties, most of the active caddies were young and agile. Besides the mature, full-grown men, there was the vast group of youngsters who preferred giving school a miss and earning good money, which not only catered to their simple needs (no Walkman, MP3s or cell phones then), but also helped supplement their parents' income. Caddies were in great demand, and the more proficient ones found full time employment with the better players (who tipped handsomely), or with the big-time betters (who tipped even more handsomely). Caddying was a safe and reliable source of income.

Some of the youngsters, like **Ah Tiong, Swee Wah** and **Ah Hong**, who lived in settlements surrounding the golf course and who had honed their skills on the course during "safe" hours, drifted into tournament play and eventually into teaching, leaving the not-so-enterprising or skillful ones behind. Then came the increase in caddy fees and the gradual

introduction of the pull cart followed by the electric cart, and finally the buggy. The need for caddies diminished considerably, and the young and able-bodied left in droves, seeking other forms of employment. Left behind were the elderly and the ones who knew no other way of life, and the caddies you find today are usually the senior members of the fraternity who are unfamiliar with other skills and whose lives are inextricably intertwined with the history of golf in SICC.

And so today we have a caddy hut with much more creature comforts than in the past, but hardly used. No more is it a busy, buzzing hive of activity. It is now an empty shell, occupied by the infrequent retired groundsmen and green-keepers who have come to enjoy Madam Toh's culinary skills, and the occasional group of grizzled ancients whose services have been requisitioned by a Member with guests, or a group bent on enjoying a game without the tiresome interference of any extraneous physical labour. And in a couple of months, it will be no more, razed to the ground to make way for more cars to park.



Madam Toh Hian



Door leading to Madam Toh's residence