Mayor Bobby Simpson tees off Sunday at City Park’s nine-hole golf course as members of the Celtic Society of Louisiana pipe ‘Scotland the Brave’ in honor of the 75th anniversary of the park’s opening. Scotsman Tom Bendelow designed the course.

City Park
Birthday
75th anniversary bash
was nostalgic for many

By MIKE DUNNE
Advocate staff writer

For Winnie Byrd, 77, it was finally swimming well enough to make it to the island in the middle of the old City Park pool.

For Sue Turner, 76, it was an exotic trip from Plaquemine to see a zoo for the first time and to ride the carousel, which everyone called “the flying horses.”

For Mary Lynn Langlois, 51, it was the “family” of lifeguards when she was growing up nearby and learning ballet dancing.

City Park opened 75 years ago Sunday and has been an important part of life around the city and in the parish. It was the second park in Baton Rouge when it opened in 1928, featuring a nine-hole public golf course, a large irregularly shaped swimming pool and clubhouse, the building with the flying horses, and a fledgling zoo.

Friends of City Park, a nonprofit group, held a birthday party for the park Sunday afternoon in the Baton Rouge Gallery, which now takes up most of the clubhouse. The East Baton Rouge Parish Recreation and Park Commission reduced green fees for the golf course for the weekend to 75 cents — enough to bring out a third more golfers than the usual 100 on a hot August weekend, said Golf Director Jack Terry.

The park’s beginning goes back to Feb. 15, 1876, when the city of Baton Rouge bought 126 acres of land during an auction of the William Pike Estate in New Orleans.

The city’s idea was to use the land as an incentive for the fledgling Louisiana State University to stay in the city. If the university stayed in town and used the agricultural land, it could keep it. If the university left town, the land would revert to the city.

By 1924, LSU had moved to its present location on the south end of town. A committee of the Chamber of Commerce worked with the city and LSU to swap the land for a scenic boulevard entrance to the university, which became Dalrymple Drive.

About 100 of the original acres became the park and about 60 acres of swampland was converted into a lake and donated by Cu-Perkins Real Estate, which was developing homes in the area around the park and lake.

Some homes on then dead-end Goldenrod Avenue — now Park Boulevard — were purchased to add room on the park’s north end.

Byrd grew up on Park Boulevard and remembers the easy walk or quick bike ride to the park.

Parker Thornton, 9, seated, listens to speeches Sunday during a silver anniversary celebration at Baton Rouge’s City Park. Members of the Celtic Society of Louisiana, who performed bagpipe selections, are Helen McGeen, left, and Julie Bergin.

“I learned to swim there (the pool) and finally made it out to the island, which I did with great, great pleasure,” Byrd said. Making it to the island proved you could cavort in the deep end.

“Honey, that was a landmark,” Byrd said. The island was later removed as a tempting hazard.

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Byrd also remembers the flying horses well. "You had birthday parties there," she said. After the summer season, the horses were put up and the building was used for skating or dances. It was the gathering place for junior-high and senior-high students.

Byrd also remembers a Junior League Aquaganza that coincided with the swimming movies and events that made Esther Williams a star. The league brought in a Broadway producer and costumes and recruited high-school and college students for the show. "I was a dancer — my swimming wasn’t good enough," Byrd said.

"I remember the zoo — not too fondly," she said. Remnants of the old zoo are still seen off Dalrymple just north of East Washington — concrete and some fencing.

Pathetic as it was, the zoo was one of the things Turner said she remembers. She lived in Plaquemine but would come near the park to visit her grandmother. "I remember the fox, the bear, alligators," she said. "Maybe they had a monkey or two."

Another big attraction was riding the flying horses. "You were really disappointed when you got on and it didn’t go up and down" as the carousel spun around, Turner said.

Kevin and Jayne Thibodeaux, members of the Friends of City Park, said the group would love to see another carousel open at the park. It would be another big draw to compete with golf, which is the most dominant feature of the park. The pool closed in the 1960s with officials citing age rather than racial strife and the carousel was razed in the 1950s to make way for the multipurpose activity building.

The golf course is one of 18 now on the National Register of Historic Places, said Lillie Petit Gallagher of Friends of the City Park. It is the second course designed by Scotsman Tom Bendelow to be so designated.

Mayor Bobby Simpson, who told the crowd at the party he is an avid golfer, said he had never played the course, but planned to rectify that Sunday.

Eugene Young, who recently retired as BREC’s superintendent after 42 years in that post, noted some of the changes.

"Well," he said, looking around, "it is pretty much like it was."

"The golf course hasn’t changed much," although he counted six times the course was renovated and restored.