

# SANDHILLS

GOLF ISN'T REGION'S ONLY TREASURE



Counterclockwise, from top left, magnolias add to the beauty of the Sandhills; Fort Bragg figures heavily in the economy; landmarks such as the Carolina Hotel in Pinehurst attract tourists; flowers and fountains add to Cumberland's allure; a marker certifies that Babe Ruth hit his first home run and acquired his nickname in Fayetteville; and equestrian events abound.



**A**bout 1.1 million tourists make pilgrimages each year to the Sandhills region of North Carolina. Many are coming to Pinehurst, mostly for the world-class golf courses there and in neighboring Southern Pines and Aberdeen. But while golf gets them to the Sandhills, the region south-

east of the Piedmont and west of the Coastal Plains, it is the exceptional service industries, educational institutions and excellent health care presented in a picturesque setting that often gets visitors to stay.

Moore County, home to Pinehurst, Southern Pines and Aberdeen, continues to be a leading

location for tourism. For the 2002-03 fiscal year, it attracted \$279.9 million in tourism revenue and was ranked ninth in the state. Over the past 10 years, revenue has increased 87%. The industry is the backbone of the Sandhills economy and provides more than 5,000 jobs and \$24.6 million in state and local tax revenue.

Caleb Miles, president and CEO of the Pinehurst, Southern Pines and Aberdeen Convention and Visitors Bureau, will be the first to say that tourism touches everyone in Moore County. "We have unique attributes. There are no mountains or ocean to attract visitors. It is the unique blend of topography — sandy soil, rolling hills, mild climate — and the rich golf-resort heritage combined with our quaint villages and towns. Not to mention that golf was ranked the best quality of any U.S. destination in 2002 by *Golf Digest*."

Miles admits there will always be work to do to ensure sustainable growth. Programs such as Partners in Progress combine efforts of the Moore County Chamber of Commerce and the CVB with those of economic developers to market a strong brand for the entire Sandhills.

## Pinehurst No. 2 was so successful as the host of the 1999 U.S. Open that the tournament is returning in 2005, a nearly unheard-of turnaround.

Last winter, the partners placed cooperative marketing advertisements in *Golf Digest* and *Golf Magazine*. It was a first, and the group plans other initiatives for the near future.

But no one will have to pay for the publicity the region will get in 2005 when the U.S. Open Championship men's golf tournament returns to Pinehurst No. 2 in Pinehurst and in 2007 when the

Women's Open comes back to Pine Needles in Southern Pines. Those events benefit not only the Sandhills but the entire state.

Pinehurst was so successful as the host of the 1999 U.S. Open that the tournament is returning in 2005, a nearly unheard-of quick turnaround. About 40,000 people will attend the event daily, generating \$100 million in revenue. But there is more to the golf experience



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in the Sandhills than Pinehurst No. 2 and Pine Needles. Courses such as Talamore also have a following. "We are not a commercial destination, but we thrive on keeping the heritage of the great game of golf alive. No other area will give you the feeling of history and heritage like we do here," says John McDougald, Talamore's director of golf.

Whether from golf or more traditional business and industry, commerce is booming in the Sandhills. It shows up in a number of ways, says William A. Martin, president of Cumberland County Business Council. "The unemployment rate in the county was 5.2% last November, a full percentage point below the state average." Much of the growth is due to technology-based companies. Advanced Internet Technologies, which hosts

Web sites; Schoollink, an Internet service and software company; and a Cingular Wireless customer-service center have led the way. Two key ingredients sought by new and expanding business — real estate and a trained work force — can be found in Cumberland. A high volume of skilled labor comes from Fort Bragg army base and Pope Air Force Base, both near Fayetteville. "Almost 8,000 people exit the military each year, and they are highly skilled, highly educated and have a tremendous work ethic."

In addition, the county is proud of its educational institutions. Fayetteville State University, Fayetteville Technical Community College and Methodist College contribute significantly to the quality of life. Fayetteville Tech's culinary program and Methodist's resort-management and golf-management programs

enable students to share their talents locally and around the world.

Education will play a key role in Cumberland County growth and in attracting industry. Fayetteville Tech, the state's third-largest community college, has developed a program to train high school students for careers in biotech. After graduation, students will attend FTCC for two years to get an associate's degree and complete their final two years at Fayetteville State to earn their bachelor's. The program is scheduled to begin this fall.

Many counties faced dramatic declines in tourism in the last several years, but Cumberland posted a 9.9% gain in 2002-2003, according to the state Division of Tourism, Film and Sports Development, and is ranked in the top 10 for overall economic impact from travel and

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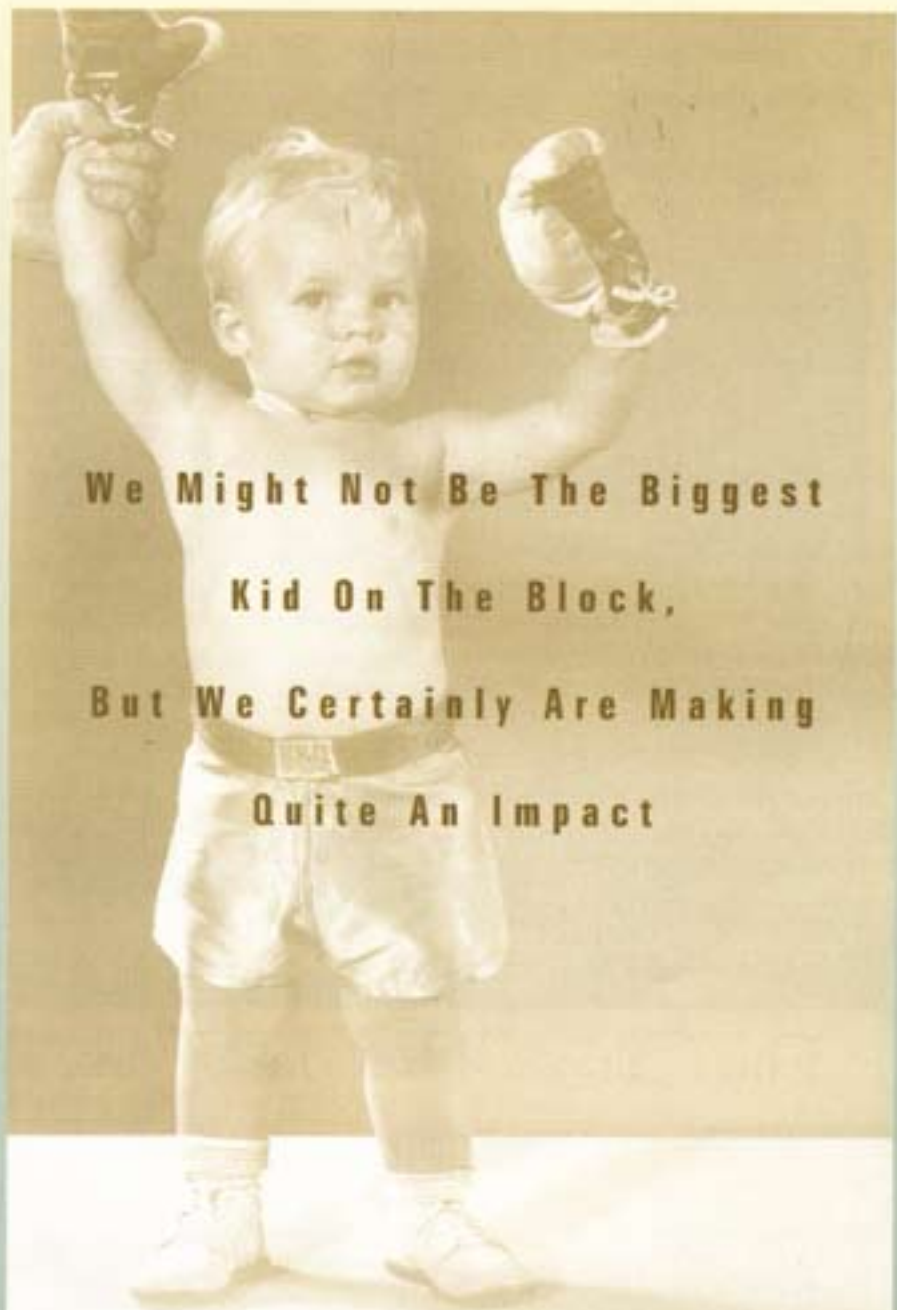


tourism. Year-end 2002 tourism revenue topped out at \$270.4 million.

Plans for economic growth in Cumberland County include exploring the creation of a sports-marketing council and developing a cultural-heritage package with surrounding communities. John Meroski, president and CEO of the Fayetteville Area Convention & Visitors Bureau, reports that efforts are under way on both fronts. "Part of this plan was to develop a community brand name, which is now known as 'history, heroes and a hometown feeling.'" To that end, the Convention and Visitors Bureau has launched an aggressive marketing campaign that includes trade-show appearances and advertisements in visitor guides.

In Scotland County, another part of the Sandhills, leaders are banking on education. St. Andrews Presbyterian College in Laurinburg is ranked by *U.S. News and World Report* as one of the country's top 200 liberal-arts colleges. Among the components that have built the school's reputation are its five-time champion equestrian team, bagpipe band, student newspaper and the nation's largest collection of Celtic music. The college was the first to offer a four-year degree in therapeutic horsemanship and equine business. From 2000 to 2002, enrollment increased 18%. Students come from 42 states and 15 countries. The increase has fed unique study programs and curricula, such as study-abroad programs in China, Ecuador and Italy. Yet the school's enrollment of about 1,100 undergraduates allows it to maintain average class sizes at 12.

The presence of the college gives Laurinburg cultural and educational amenities that are rare in a primarily rural community. Laurinburg and Scotland County leaders credit much of the county's industrial growth to



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## Business leaders across the region say the high quality of health care in the Sandhills inspires tourists to become permanent residents.

the presence of St. Andrews. The history of the Scots in North Carolina is central to the college's heritage as well as the Sandhills'. The early settlement of Scotland County and surrounding counties was by Highland Scots who migrated up the Cape Fear River in the 18th century. They established educational institutions that were absorbed over the years into St. Andrews. Extensions of this influence are still felt today.

Students and faculty at St. Andrews play vital roles in the community, providing local leadership and adding significantly to the cultural life of the area. "We are an employer for community businesses and bring student dollars that support the community. Institutions of higher learning are often a plus when recruiters are trying to attract industry," says Robert Hopkins, the college's

dean and vice president for academic affairs.

Business leaders say the high quality of health care in the Sandhills inspires tourists to become permanent residents. FirstHealth of the Carolinas is a network of three hospitals, clinics and physician offices. Moore Regional Hospital in Pinehurst is part of FirstHealth and recently completed a \$58.7 million expansion that included a patient tower with all private rooms, a comprehensive community-hospital cancer center and an enlarged emergency room.

FirstHealth has participated in clinical trials in cardiology, oncology and thoracic specialties, and Moore Regional is participating in a national study to find ways to lower the risk of ovarian cancer and to detect it earlier. It also is in the forefront of infection-control studies. The hospital was selected by Colorado-based Health Grades Inc., a hospital rating service, as among the state's top 10 for its treatment of heart, vascular and orthopedics patients and in overall clinical excellence. "The aging population, access to excellent physicians and demand for the latest technology has spurred the growth of health care in this area," says Charles T. Frock, president and CEO of FirstHealth of the Carolinas. "We are seeing a growing number of families and young people choosing to live here, as well as commuters from Fort Bragg, Raleigh and Fayetteville. We are committed to continuing to provide the care that patients require while continuing our charge to provide new technology, excellent care and a safe environment for patients and employees."

Troy-based First Bancorp, the holding company for First Bank, draws on such community benefits as the presence of golf, tourism and horses to keep itself fiscally well,

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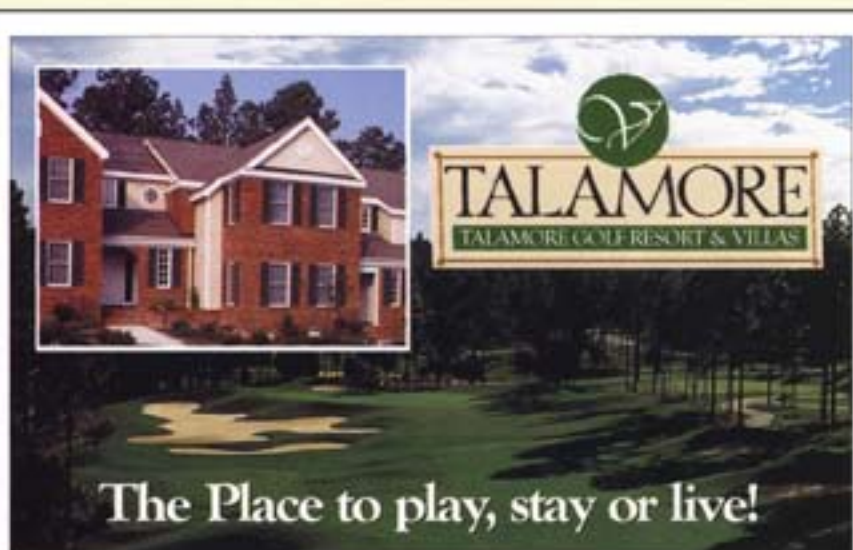
according to Johnny Burns, executive vice president of First Bank. "The banking industry is competitive in the Sandhills region because of the quality of life, beauty of the area, health-care facilities and cultural activities. There is a saying that goes, 'You get the sand in your shoes and can't get it out.' That feeling is alive and well in the Sandhills." First Bank has 10 offices in Moore County and is the sixth-largest North Carolina-based bank.

Also praising the economic impact of education on Sandhills industry is Ed Swartz, chief executive of Sanford-based Static Control Components, which makes parts that allow recycling of printer cartridges. "When young people graduate from high school, very few have the understanding of how commercial business operates. Our experience with graduates from Central Carolina Community College is that they are mature and have a perception of what the business is trying to accomplish. The students have been real assets and bring value to our business. They are instant contributors to the success of our company."

CCCC, the eighth-largest community college in North Carolina, serves Harnett, Lee and Chatham counties, which border Moore County. Based in Sanford, the college has developed curricula around jobs that Static Control has created. "We do not see any impediments to growth and plan to add new operations in the next five years," Swartz says.

It doesn't matter whether your interest in coming to the Sandhills is to enjoy the scenic resorts or to discover the rich Scottish heritage. "The Home of American Golf" exerts its pull on everyone. ■

*Lynne Brandon is a free-lance writer based in Greensboro.*



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