Mendenhall remembered for long GCSAA service

"Chet was the most devoted man I knew where GCSAA was concerned."

--Art Snyder

GCSAA: The Mendenhall Award for extensive time devoted to the turf and industry.
• 1986 — GCSAA's Distinguishe Service Award.
• 1990 — USGA's Green Section Award.

Such career chronology for one raised on a farm in Oklahoma is amazing.

Mendenhall struck out for fame, if not fortune, in 1920. He landed a job with the Wichita, Kan., Country Parks and Forestry Department as superintendent for a new city park. The city decided to add a golf course. Mendenhall's introduction to this arena and the sport led to a life-long enchantment with all facets of the game, especially the behind-the-scenes activity.

Improvisation was necessary in those early days. Water was a problem, when Mendenhall tackled construction of the Wichita course. He decided to build sand greens.

Horses pulled gang mowers over rough and rugged until Chet acquired a Fordson tractor. He converted it to a turf tractor by bolting an old set of rims to the outside of the wheels, thereby widening it for stability in the sandy soil.

Mendenhall became greenkeeper at Wichita CC in 1928. While there, he kept buffalo grass lawns to one inch and greens at a quarter-inch with the help of gang mowers.

Innovator/inventor Mendenhall, who preferred the "thinker" label, was having trouble with the South German bentgrass. Much thatch posed a putting problem. Chet designed rakes to lift the grass in front of mowers to cut away some thatch. Using a tin cylinder filled with concrete, he made a spiker to aerify compacted soil. He obtained what he believed was the first aerifier in Kansas, cut off the draw-bar and mounted the machine on the three-point hitch of his Ford tractor.

Chet switched to greenkeeper at Mission Hills Country Club in Kansas City in 1934. Chief maintenance problem there was loss of bluegrass and bentgrass fairways to drought. Chet installed a quick-cutting snap valve irrigation system. He planted zoysiagrass on all tees. This experiment proved most successful.

Mendenhall retired from Mission Hills in 1960, at age 70, but couldn't reconcile to an easy chair. He plunged into golf course design and construction, and for the next 12 years designed and supervised construction of several courses in Missouri and Kansas.

Finally, at 82, it was time to slow down and enjoy sunny life in Arizona.

In addition to his widow (first wife Margaret died in 1979) and Maren, Mendenhall is survived by Earline (Theis) of Santa Fe, N.M., Leland of Yakima, Wash., and Paul of Nevada, Mo.

Snyder, Jacob oldest among founders

The death of Chet Mendenhall at 96 leaves longtime friend Art Snyder, 93, of Phoenix, who shares the same April 1, 1920 birthdate, as the oldest member of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America.

However, Snyder is not GCSAA's senior member. That distinction belongs "by far the shortest five minutes" to Ernie Jacob of Pittsburgh, who is a "mere 84."

Jacob and Snyder were both voted into membership in 1929. Applicants were processed alphabetically.

Jacob received membership number 568, Snyder 573. Mendenhall's number was 264.

William S. Mellon of Lancaster, Pa., who caddied with Snyder at Oakmont Country Club in Pittsburgh, and who died earlier this year, held No. 443.

Snyder plays almost daily at Skyline Country Club in Phoenix, with son Jim, who succeeded him there as course superintendent.

Snyder in 1973 became the only superintendent ever elected to the Arizona Golf Hall of Fame. Jacob has been sidelined by illness the past two months, but hopes to return to play soon at the South Hills Country Club course in Pittsburgh where he was superintendent for 37 years. He was made an honorary member there upon retirement in 1974.

Jacob now lists a 22 handicap, a far cry from the scratch tag he bore when qualifying for the National Open at Winged Foot Country Club in Mamaroneck, N.Y., in 1929, and winning the first superintendents' golf tournament in 1930.

Jacob and wife Berdie have two sons — Paul, recently retired after 26 years as a TWA pilot, and Glenn, a captain in the U.S. Navy, and stepdaughter Margaret Bunting.

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