It's desolate now. The steel mill in Massillon, Ohio, where Jim Jennings toiled for nearly 25 years, is hollow of machinery and vacant of humanity. Jennings leans on the rusty chain-link fence that surrounds the vast structure formerly named Massillon Stainless Inc. He gazes up at the colossal 13-story, bland-looking building that houses the steel-making furnace he once operated. There's joyless silence in the air, but Jennings can still hear the ferocious and blissful sound of the once-mighty furnace in his mind.

It's distressing for the 46-year-old Jennings to be here on this autumn day. It's the first time Jennings has returned to the mill — the place that provided the paycheck that helped him feed and clothe his family since 1978 — since he and about 60 others were laid off about 14 months ago.

Jennings had been laid off before from the mill, but he was always recalled. But when the mill announced it was closing for good in October 2002 and moving its machinery to China, Jennings knew he was never going back.

But Jennings, mindful of the volatile industry he was employed, considered another livelihood back in the early 1990s. He enrolled at The Ohio State University's Agricultural Technical Institute (ATI) in Wooster, Ohio, to study turfgrass management in 1992. This month, 11 years later, Jennings will receive a two-year degree and embark on a new career.

He's excited but understandably apprehensive about his future. Jennings wants to be a superintendent, but he knows his new field is a competitive one.

"Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and wonder if there are any jobs out"
On the Job Front

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there,” Jennings says. “That’s the scary part.”

Jennings isn’t the only one waking up worried at four in the morning. Every year a horde of fledgling turf professionals, armed with two- and four-year degrees, enters the industry with the will to flourish. But they’re also leery of the job market they will find.

They have many questions about the health of their profession. Is it a crowded market place? Are there enough jobs for capable graduates? Will finding a job require relocating? And how long will it take to become a head superintendent?

The pragmatic Jennings says he’s not looking for a dream job. He just wants to work with capable people, learn the business and gain experience. And he’d like to do all those things close to home for a few years while his 14-year-old son Jordan, his only child, finishes high school.

Time will tell if Jennings and other graduates will find what they’re looking for. But one thing is for certain — they will find an industry that has suffered from the dismal economy the past few years. However, that shouldn’t intimidate them, says Tom Watschke, longtime professor of turfgrass science at Penn State University.

“The sky isn’t falling on the golf course industry,” Watschke says. “Are times a little tougher? There’s no denying that. Is this a permanent state? I don’t think so.”

Starting out

Though people study golf course maintenance for myriad reasons, a common one is their desire to work outdoors.

Jennings worked several odd jobs after he was laid off from the steel mill in 1989. A few years later, he learned he was eligible for a government job-training program set up for displaced steel employees.

As part of the program, Jennings took a personality test, which revealed his love of golf (something he already knew) and his interest in working outdoors. A job counselor suggested he attend Ohio State’s ATI, which was funded through the job-training program.

In the spring of 1992, Jennings began going to school part-time at ATI and worked as a starter at a nearby country club. He also tended bar. But when he was called back to work at the mill in 1995, he ditched school because he needed a steady paycheck to support his family, and the mill provided it.

Jennings was laid off again in 1999. He went back to school in 2000 and was recalled to the mill again a short time later. But he was let go for good last fall.

Even though it took Jennings more than a decade to get his degree, he says he loved learning about entomology, turf species and other subjects. “I’m passionate about this industry,” he says.

Jennings, who sports a 10 handicap, hopes his passion helps land him a job as an assistant superintendent. He might like his chances.

Kim Heck, GCSAA’s director of career development, says her conversations with established superintendents reveal that golf courses in some regions of the country need assistant superintendents now. A reason for this is that many golf courses have been hiring more assistants — first and second positions — the past few years.

“The average superintendent has 20 people reporting to him, compared to 17 people in 2000,” Heck says.

GCSAA relies on anecdotal information to monitor the job market. It doesn’t conduct scientific studies to determine how many people join and leave the industry annually.

Heck says she and other GCSAA representatives meet with students every year and talk to them about employment. Heck says students in the past three years have told her they’re confident about getting jobs after graduation. “The students paint a fairly bright picture.”

That said, Heck notes that not all students will be able to secure the jobs they most desire. They may have to settle on taking positions as equipment technicians or spray technicians if they can’t get jobs as first or second assistants.

Bruce Clarke, director of the Center for Turf Science at Rutgers University/Cook College, realizes that golf course construction is down, but he still says the school has not had any problems placing its graduates. About 12 students graduate from the school’s four-year turf program annually.

Clarke says the school has experienced a dip in applications for its two-year certificate program. While he admits the troubled economy might have something to do with the decrease, he is certain that the GCSAAs’s push to enhance the profession from a credibility standpoint — a four-year degree is better than a two-year degree — has something do to with it.

Penn State has two programs — a two-year program that’s specific to golf turf and a four-year turfgrass science program. The former program gradu-
ates about 25 people annually. The latter program graduates about 40 people each year. Not all of them go into golf course maintenance. In fact, Watschke says the percentage of graduates going into golf course maintenance has been decreasing because of career growth in other areas of the turf industry such as sports turf.

Watschke says Penn State hasn't had a problem placing its students in jobs for several years. No, they're not landing big-cheese positions. But, as Watschke points out, most graduating students do not land jobs as top superintendents directly out of school, no matter what the job market is like. "Less than 1 percent of our students get those jobs."

The industry has grown substantially in the last 30 years, and jobs now often require a college education, Watschke notes.

"As we approached the 1980s, the notion of having a college-trained assistant became popular and a necessity," Watschke says. "Fast-forward another 10 years, and it's not uncommon for a superintendent on an 18-hole property to have a first and second assistant. Fast-forward to 2000, and it's not uncommon for a course to have a college-trained person as a spray technician/pest scout. There are even college-trained irrigation technicians on courses."

Watschke's point is there are plenty of jobs for graduates, even if new-course constructions have dropped from about 400 in 2000 to roughly 235 this year. He says second assistants in the Mid-Atlantic region are paid between $28,000 and $32,000. A first assistant makes a few thousand more.

Bruce Williams, certified superintendent of the Los Angeles Country Club and an industry veteran, advises people looking for work to monitor the golf industry from an economic standpoint. They might not want to consider work in areas where courses have shut down and laid off employees. "It's all about supply and demand," he says.

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On the Job Front

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As in other industries (and maybe a tad more), one has to go where the jobs are. So a big part about employment in the golf course maintenance industry has to do with a person’s flexibility to pick up and move, Williams says. For Jennings, it’s a good bet there’s better turf nutrition philosophy is to who’s turf is he not going to get a chance to prove himself?

The bottleneck

Mitch Tankersley worked in sales and marketing for a Silicon Valley software company for about 10 years before burnout set in and he quit his job. Tankersley then enrolled at a nearby community college and sought a two-year degree in horticulture. While going to school, the 35-year-old landed a job on the crew at San Jose (Calif.) Country Club in March 2002. “It was a lot of work, but it was the best move I ever made,” he says.

It only took Tankersley a little more than a year to be promoted to second assistant at San Jose. He’s hoping to become a first assistant even sooner and plans to be a superintendent within five years.

But becoming a superintendent in five years may be difficult if the job market for the top posts doesn’t improve. Heck says there’s an infusion of experienced assistants but not enough top jobs for all of them.

“It’s taking assistants longer to become head superintendents,” Heck says. “That’s where there’s a bottleneck.” That’s no surprise to Williams, who says the decline in the number of new course openings explains why there aren’t as many superintendent jobs now as there were three years ago.

Watschke says the logjam is more the result of demographics. “It has to do with what the average age of superintendents is,” he says. “The industry went through a period in the 1970s and 1980s when a lot of superintendents retired. Now the average age of superintendents is much less. Because there’s a younger general population of superintendents, the turnover rate at the top is slower.”

While that may be true, some industry insiders theorize that an oversupply of assistant superintendents could cause many golf course financial decision makers to replace veteran superintendents and their hefty salaries with hungry rookies at half the cost, especially in a period of economic distress.

Heck doesn’t deny that such a scenario could unfold, but she doubts it would become a trend. Heck says employers realize it’s vital to employ seasoned superintendents to oversee their golf courses.

“So they’re willing to pay them what the market will bear,” she adds. “That’s good news for the profession.”

Yes, superintendents with loads of experience and hefty salaries have been let go for frugality’s sake. But that happens in a lot of industries, Williams notes. “Too many people think that things like that are unique to the golf industry.”

The general rule of thumb is that 55 percent of a golf course’s maintenance budget is devoted to payroll, Williams says. So if the budget gets slashed, it usually starts where most of the money is being spent. And if a quality superintendent is let go for financial reasons, the course will suffer in the long run, Williams says. “It’s shortsighted thinking.”

Speaking of pay, Heck says the average superintendent’s salary has increased from $44,500 in 1993 to $63,065 in 2003. She expects the upward trend to continue.

The pay range can vary, though. It depends on type of course, region, a person’s experience and other factors. But Watschke notes that superintendents’ pay range is comparable to that of the general labor in the United States, where 12 percent to 14 percent of people make $60,000 or more, and up to 6 percent make $100,000 or more.

The right stuff

Despite the golf boom the past 10 years, Heck doesn’t believe that people are going into the profession for all the wrong reasons — because it’s glamorous and they get to play golf three days a week. She says the GCSAA has spent a lot of time and effort to market the profession to potential students for what Continued on page 20A

Salaries: Up, Up, Up

The good news is that average salaries for superintendents have soared in the past 10 years, according to GCSAA.

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it is — a splendid and rewarding profession, but not necessarily as glamorous as they might think.

"I believe that the people getting into this profession are coming in with their eyes open fully," Heck says.

Some insiders are also concerned that the industry has too many schools offering turf management programs. Heck says she gets several calls from college representatives who want to implement turf programs in their curriculums. She tells them like it is — that in order to compete with other schools, the turf school wannabes must hire top instructors and be heavily committed to their programs.

If an interested school happens to be 20 miles down the road from a turf university powerhouse like Penn State, Heck says she'll discourage the school from implementing a program.

"We're very frank with them," Heck says. "The association is cognizant of the potential proliferation of programs."

While Williams is also concerned about the growth of schools, he says they've done a better job of presenting the profession for what it really is. The schools have done that by letting experienced superintendents speak to classes about what their jobs entail.

"I used to hear students say — and they're probably still saying it — that they didn't want to get stuck behind desks," Williams says. "But the reality is, unless you have an office manager, you're going to spend a lot of time behind a desk as a superintendent — perhaps as much as half your time."

In the end, finding a job in the field or taking the next step in the profession to become a superintendent is about a lot of things, including timing and contacts. But most everyone agrees that enthusiasm plays a huge part in defining a career.

Clarke says job prospects will continue to be good for students who are eager to make an impact.

"There are jobs out there for well-qualified students," he adds. "Students who aren't really into it will have a more difficult time finding jobs."

Heck says employers want people who desire to learn, among other things. "They want quick learners and people who can assume more responsibility and add value immediately."

And employers want people, no matter their age, who want to make a difference, Williams says. The industry won't turn its back on a 46-year-old newcomer like Jennings if he's hungry to make an impact.

"There's always plenty of room at the top," Williams says. "If you've got the right attitude, the right work ethic and you really care, there's a place for you in the industry."

Jennings hopes he gets his chance. He pauses when asked how he plans to market himself to get a job. He has the tanned look of a golfer, but retains the rugged appearance of a former steel worker.

"I just need a chance to prove myself," he says softly. "And I need someone that doesn't mind me looking over his shoulder to find out why he's doing this and that."

"I'm hoping I'm in the right place at the right time."