

The Good Old Days

by Ed Wollenberg, Gary Country Club

So many of us seem to delight in talking about the "good old days". I can remember in my early youth to hear my elders talk about previous times as being better. I know I was always excited and impressed to hear my father and his cronies eulogize their life experiences. As I grew up and attended school and studied history and learned about the generations before my time, I discovered that they may not have been the "good old days". The people on top of the heap in society in the Middle Ages was about 5%. The other 95% lived in filth and degrading poverty. They were literally slaves who, by their hard work and sacrifices, made life enjoyable and bearable for those above them on the social ladder.

We don't have to go all the way back to the Middle Ages to know that the death rate was very high during eras past. Plagues and disease wiped out entire population groups. Life was risky and uncertain and people could enjoy no definite confidence concerning the future, because they did not know whether there would be any future for them. In fact, until the present century when medical science came into its own, the death rate of the world has always been high. The exploding population, which gives us much concern today, is due more to the declining death rate than it is to the increasing birth rate. And although there has been a decrease in birth rate in recent years, there has also been an increase in the life expectancy of people.

Philologists, that is, people who study language, tell us that in the early days man didn't use a future tense when speaking or writing. Life was so uncertain that they did not say, "We will eat dinner tonight". Instead they said, "Should we be alive tonight and should there be any dinner we will eat". Today, we can be reasonably sure and expect to enjoy a future. So, would you say that the "good old days" were better?

It was in November of 1983 while attending the wedding of the daughter of a friend of mine, that my wife and I had the good fortune to sit across the table from a young superintendent and his charming wife. Needless to say the conversation soon drifted into the topic of our work and golf courses. After touching on many phases of maintenance and personal problems related to our profession, he said to me, "Eddie, you've been around a long time, were the courses better in years past?" It seems he was being told repeatedly by some of his old members, that in the "good old days" the courses were in finer condition. Well, I will try to answer this question, by past experiences, and hope that my senility is not as obvious as the person making that statement.

It was the later part of July in 1928 that I set foot on my first golf course. And now after 56 years I am finding it hard and very traumatic to be thinking about retiring from a life that has been fun, challenging, exciting and where I came into contact with so many wonderful people. I have always felt I was the luckiest person alive to be doing something that I enjoyed so much and looked forward to each and every day, and get paid for it! How many people can honestly make that statement.

In my association with golf courses over these many years, I have seen many changes which most of you will verify but probably not believe unless you are from this time era. In order to put it into some perspective I suppose it should be told categorically.

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LABOR: Prior to July of 1928 I had been working in the hay fields from sunup to sundown for \$1.00 per day. The man who paid me was the superintendent at the Olympia Fields Country Club, who I suppose was doing a little "moonlighting" on the side. Upon completion of the haying season, he came to me and offered me a job picking weeds out of the greens at the country club. My pay would be 25 cents an hour, 10 hours a day, 55 hours a week (overtime pay had not been invented yet) for a grand total of \$13.75 a week. Well, I was still going to school and my math had never been my strong point, but I was smart enough to realize this was an increase of 150% over what I had made prior to that. And I didn't have to share it with the Federal & State governments, social security, and umpteen other bureaucracy's. It was all mine.

Olympia Fields Country Club had 72 holes at that time, along with 80 to 100 acres consisting of a huge practice range area and land to take top soil from for topdressing and basement pits for the dumping of clubhouse garbage and grounds debris. The labor price ranged from 25 to 50 cents an hour, with the average about 40 cents an hour. We employed approximately 100 men, with about 20 men per course, 10 men in a "bull gang" and 10 men in the forestry crew. It was rumored that the superintendents salary was \$6000.00 a year, plus a house on the course and a Model A Ford for his conveyance. A fantastic amount.

I left the Olympia Fields Country Club in August of 1941 making 47½ cents an hour, to take a job with the U.S. Government for \$21.00 a month. After 4½ years in the service I returned and went to work as an assistant superintendent for 75 cents an hour. In 1948 I took my first job as a superintendent for the huge sum of \$3600.00. Now 36 years later I would assume the average superintendents salary is around \$30,000.00 with some making considerably more. And I'm sure it's safe to say that the average golf course laborer is making the minimum of \$3.35 to a high of \$9.00 per hour.

IRRIGATION: Early irrigation was done by a single cylinder gasoline engine pumping out of the creek. A hose system was used and usually only greens and tees were watered. The 4th course (now the North Course) at Olympia Fields Country Club was watered from fairway valves in the roughs with hose sometimes totalling 400 feet. This was connected to a traveling sprinkler giving it a wide range of 360 degree circle coverage. In the early 30's it was decided to water the fairways on the other 3 courses. I helped put in these systems. It was a center row system with quick couplers and steel pipe. All the lines were dug by hand. Trenchers, backhoes and PVC was still a manufacturers dream.

Editor's Note: Ed Wollenberg's article will be continued in the May issue. Be sure to read it for it is quite interesting.

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