

The Olympia Fields I Remember

by Pete Vandercook

I worked for five summers (from 1947 to 1951) on the grounds crew at Olympia Fields Country Club. When I was hired, the superintendent was John Darrah. John had been superintendent at Beverly and had come to Olympia Fields some time during the 1946-47 winter season. I believe his replacement at Beverly was Bob Williams.

John personally owned a 1946 Chevrolet pickup truck with a tow-type sprayer. The truck had a short boom mounted in front of the front bumper and two large booms extending from each side just behind the cab. He did contract spraying of 2-4D on golf courses. Golf courses had sprayers to spray greens, but most did not have equipment to spray fairways. Dandelions had been either allowed to flourish or were harvested by hand by armies of temporary workers. John also had a jeep with a trencher on the back and did contract trenching on golf courses. When John left Olympia Fields, he bought a small farm on Route 30, grew sod on it and also worked as a factory rep for Cleary and Sodmaster. John's sod farm is now called Lincoln Mall and John's sod farm venture obviously turned out to be quite profitable.

In those days, the crew was made up of a small nucleus of permanent employees, an army of local students, and a group of retirees (mostly railroaders from Matteson and farmers from the area). The old men wore long woolen underwear on even the very hottest days which amazed me.

Alex Landry and Jimmy Dodge each mowed fairways on one course. They mowed eight hours a day and four hours on Saturday and just continued on around. Each fairway was mowed three or more times a week.

Wally Domm changed cups on #4 (the North course today) and Webe Ellis on #1 (the South course). They both walked carrying the cup cutter in one hand and a bucket with tee towels, ball washer soap, and a cup hook, etc. in the other hand. On his way home each evening, Wally would take the dirty tee towels to the clubhouse laundry and pick up the ones he had delivered the day before. (Some years later Wally married the lady that ran the clubhouse laundry).

Wally and Webe were considered course foremen and also did any spraying or fertilizing needed on their respective courses. Wally went on to be the superintendent at Calumet Country Club, Pheasant Valley and South Shore Country Clubs. Webe left the industry to become the Chief of Police in Matteson. When he started, it was a two-man department (including himself) and when he retired several years ago, it was a large suburban police force. During his years on the police force Webe from time to time mowed greens on Sunday mornings at Flossmoor Country Club for his friend, Wally Pieper, and now that he is retired, he works at Cherry Hills for Dale Pieper.

Another memorable Olympia Fields regular was Joe Tourie. An older Italian immigrant from Chicago Heights, Joe smoked Italian cigars. One cigar lasted Joe all day, and he would go through several packs of matches. Joe raked the traps on the north course in the morning and maintained the sewage filter beds in the afternoon. The beds were between the 17th and 18th fairways on the north course and were completely surrounded by hedges. Sewage from the club-

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"Where Meadow Goes,
the Water Flows"

(Olympia Field continued)

house and the cottages drained through the beds. There were two large, two-section beds which were alternately used. Joe would spade the bed not in use and rake both beds. It was impossible to slip through the hedge, look into the filter bed area and not find Joe working.

Joe told a great story. One night, some years previous, Joe was night watering and breaking in a new night waterer who was on his second day on the job. Night waterers walked, and that is what they were doing on the north course when the fog rolled in. They got lost and separated (not necessarily in that order). Finally, Joe walked into the fence that ran along the railroad tracks (the only fence on the golf course at the time). He followed the fence to the equipment building, shut off the pumps to turn off the sprinklers and went home. The new employee was never heard from again. He didn't even come in to pick up his check.

Olympia Fields was very proud of the flowers around the club house. They had two full-time gardeners who spent their winters in the greenhouse and the rest of the year in the flower beds. Seeds were actually tapped from flowers, carefully cataloged and then replanted the next season or started in the greenhouse and transplanted later. The head gardener was Joe White, an old man from Homewood. His assistant, and eventual replacement, was Eldon Rea from Matteson. With the exception of a period of time when he was in the Army during World War II, Eldon spent his entire life living in Matteson and working at Olympia Fields.

Eldon did not drive. He did not want to drive. He walked to work across the golf course each day, trapped wild animals and sold the pelts, and had the golf ball concession for the pro, Chuck Tannis. The creek ran swiftly and creek balls would travel and collect in pockets. Even in high, muddy water Eldon knew where to look for balls and find them. (Interloping ball hawks would walk barefooted in the creek and find the few balls they accidentally stepped on.) On one of his trips across the course Eldon found a wounded, young eagle. He brought the bird into the greenhouse and nursed it back to health, finally releasing it when it was healthy.

Hank Bruns was the mechanic. The equipment was very much simpler in those days, but Hank never met a lawnmower he couldn't start. He never changed a spark plug if the carburetor needed to be tweaked. He never tweaked a carburetor if a new spark plug was needed. He had a natural ability, and it was almost as though he had a personal relationship with each mower. He was a whiz at adjusting reels. He would not adjust gang mowers cold. He would leave the shop every morning about thirty minutes after the gangs had started to mow, stop each tractor and spend no more than five minutes fine-tuning each seven-gang. Putting green mowers were washed as soon as they got back to the shop and adjusted immediately. The ever present flat file was always used to dress up the leading edge of the bedknife. No one else was ever allowed to adjust reels, and the mowers cut great. Hank was indeed an expert.

Hank's brother, Archie Bruns, who had been the superintendent before John Darrah and who had handled clubhouse maintenance while John was there, returned as superintendent when John left.

Archie was a sly old fox. I stayed on in the fall of 1951 because I was going into the Army in January of 1952. There were only two of us that were young enough to mow greens, Chuck Bowen and I; and Olympia had 36 greens, one very large putting green (which counted as two greens) and two other practice greens. This in our book was a total of 40 greens! Archie offered Chuck and I this great deal. We could pick our own putting green mower, he would take us out in the morning, pick us up for lunch, and take us back out. We could mow greens in any order we wanted and go home when we were finished, and he would pay us eight hours pay.

Chuck and I were young, eager and pretty fast. We moved and mowed as fast as we could and were happy to beat Archie and Olympia Fields out of 30 or 45 minutes pay. In retrospect (and I didn't figure this out until much later), if we had walked and worked at a normal pace, we could have beat Archie and Olympia Fields out of a couple of hours of overtime. That Archie was a pretty cool guy.

I enjoyed my Olympia experience. I think it helped me develop a good work ethic, and I learned a lot about people. The nucleus of regular workers were unique in many ways but, all in all, were probably representative of a lot of golf course crews of the era.



Green Section Reorganizes Great Lakes Region

There comes a time in the life of every organization when changes are necessary to improve service and increase operational efficiency. After 10 years of service to golf facilities in a 9-state region, the time came for realignment of personnel and service areas. The new setup is called the North Central Region.

First of all, Illinois and Iowa will become part of the Mid-Continent Region, receiving the personal attention of agronomist Paul Vermeulen, who will set up an office in Illinois convenient to subscribers in Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska and Kansas. The Regional Director is Jim Moore, located in Waco, Texas, who will do Turf Advisory Service work in the more southern part of the Region.

Bob Brame will direct the North Central Region from an office near Cincinnati. His area of Turf Advisory Service responsibility will be Indiana, Ohio and Kentucky. Bob Vavrek will continue TAS work from the Wisconsin office, visiting subscribers from Michigan westward to Montana.

The Lathams and the Great Lakes name are retiring to a smaller entity on Lake Whitney, Texas where they intend to keep digging up golf courses. With clubs, not soil probes, Bowie knives or cup cutters.