

Looking at the Past

to See the Future

A time machine is required for this adventure. Hold on, fasten your seatbelts—no airbags on this ride! Did you bring your motion sickness pills? Ready, set, go! You have entered the Twilight Zone.

Okay, back to reality. But the time-travel metaphor is appropriate. History does dictate the future. As a relative newcomer to this industry, I thought I would venture back to the glory days of yesteryear to determine how and why our profession has changed, how it has remained the same and what this might mean for our future. Consider this an appetizer to further commentary on our past, present and future as the MAGCS and the GCSAA celebrate 75 years.

Remember, most of us, as youngsters, probably never thought consciously about being golf course superintendents. We started working on a golf course either because we were playing a lot of golf or hanging out on the links with our friends. Then we got the itch to see things from the superintendent's point of view until the curiosity grew to the point where we envisioned, potentially, a great career.

My virtual travel guides on this voyage were Bob Williams, Dudley Smith, Paul Voykin, Mike Bavier, Fred Opperman and James Meyer. Thanks to these elder statesmen for sharing their sentiments.

What significant changes have you witnessed in the golf industry over the last 30-50 years?

Dudley Smith notices a mounting lack of local student labor (kids today often receive large allowances from parents); an influx of Hispanic workers; and environmental precautions related to computerized spray equipment and decreased pesticide usage. He remarks upon the evolution from mowers pulled by tractors to self-propelled units. James Meyer shares Dudley's insights and also focuses on changes to aerification with deep coring, new methods of topdressing and the invention of hydraulics.

Mike Bavier remembers night-watering and the advent of automatic irrigation systems. He also feels that computers have made life easier, while lasers have changed grading and drainage installation. Bunker-raking, says

Mike, has come full circle from hand to machine back to hand. Pesticides have brought improved disease control.

Comments Paul Voykin, "The biggest change in the past 40 years since I have been a superintendent is the evolution of the golf course superintendent from one of the troika management team to the very top. The superintendent is now recognized, at least in North America, as the most important person in the golf course hierarchy. I am amazed at how smart the young superintendents are and how lucky I am to have some of them as friends."

Attire has changed, too, says Bob Williams, who went from overalls to a suit and tie. Bob also notes that business administration background is regarded and required these days; no longer are retired farmers or young fellows without college degrees passing

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- Paul Voykin

muster. Today's superintendents have college degrees. Fred Opperman, echoing Bob's thoughts, adds that Hispanic workers have changed the green industry and targets increasing emphasis on height-of-cut on greens and evolution of fertilizers.

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What problems did you have to deal with during your tenure as golf course superintendent?

Fred recalls having to educate the green chairmen and club managers, citing the USGA Green Section as a wonderful source of information. He also notes that working effectively with Hispanic employees meant overcoming language difficulties.

Dealing with dead turf and having no answers was difficult, remembers Bob, attributing such dilemmas to the lack of turf plots. Fortunately, in 1928, Albert Lascor established the USGA turf gardens in Lake Forest. Bob also recounts using mercury to control large brown patch and small brown patch (dollar spot) diseases, coping

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with unprocessed sewer sludge, spreading manure and losing employees during the Great Depression and World War II.

Dudley and James talk about C-15 decline; Dudley had to resod 30 greens. They list contaminated water, flooding and drainage among the top challenges. Mike and Paul note that dealing with government regulations, educating crews about pesticides and navigating interpersonal issues have presented major challenges.

With what inventions or innovations were you personally involved?

Bob has been involved with some unique inventions during his incredible career. He recalls the transition from hand greens-mower to motorized reel-mower during the late 1930s and early 1940s; he also used a three push-mower overgreen triplex that was about 12-15 feet wide, a duplex mower that cut two swaths with a mower gap in the middle and, in the 1950s, a three-nozzle boom for weeds in the rough. Bob reminisces about Ray Gerber, a first-class mechanic, traveling from course to course in the late '30s to grind reels.

Dudley was one of the first to hire women at his course; in 1962, he boasted the first seeded Penn-cross greens in Chicago and in 1968, the first Jacobsen "Greens-king" triplex for mowing greens. In caring for the flora and fauna at his course, Paul wrote two books, pioneering promotion of environmental responsibility. Fred, meanwhile, used a helicopter to spray for Dutch elm disease, then implemented the same procedure to spray greens and fairways on a flooded course because ground vehicles could not access the diseased areas. In 1987, after visiting Australia, Fred brought back a roller for use on greens.

What are your insights for the future?

Mike foresees management companies, general managers and golf directors adding to our professional challenges; he suggests there is a good chance that you will work harder with and for these folks than you will work on your course. His advice: adjust your attitude and enjoy your surroundings.

Dudley's concerns include college graduates in turf management leaving the industry for more income and fewer hours, the infusion of management companies and declining job security. Fred, out sniffing that Montana air, sees increased use of Internet services for purchasing and major mergers reducing the number of chemical companies.

Paul has visions of the elite golf course superintendents making fabulous salaries as we all enjoy a higher level of success and competence. Paul suggests looking for stability, tenure and trust, and enjoying your job. Both Bob and James warn of the economy putting a crunch on budgets and foretell enhanced public awareness of our role, increased EPA involvement and a greater presence from unions and management companies.

All of the gentlemen who contributed to this article have experienced the green industry as insiders and have enjoyed their jobs as golf course superintendents. So heed their wisdom and take their advice—adjust your attitude, seek camaraderie with friends and colleagues and enjoy our profession! 