

# My Friend and Mentor— Ray Gerber

On October 12, Ray Gerber will be inducted posthumously into the Illinois PGA's Hall of Fame. The IPGA has bestowed this distinction upon only one other superintendent. In honor of Ray's accomplishments and his outstanding character, our retired editor, Fred Opperman, offers this short memoir.



Ray Gerber.

*“Fred, may I buy you a drink?”*

*“To reach the top  
of one’s profession  
is noteworthy.  
To reach the top  
of one’s profession  
from a humble  
beginning is  
exceptional.  
Ray Gerber was  
exceptional.”*

*~Don Gerber*

That remark was the start of a long and wonderful relationship with Raymond Gerber, better known by all as “Ray.” The occasion was one of our Midwest meetings, which was being held at the Cypress Inn on Ogden Avenue. It may even have been an annual meeting, now that I think back on it. The year was 1969. I had been superintendent at the Elmhurst C.C. (now Oak Meadows C.C., owned by the DuPage County Forest Preserve) for three years.

After buying me a drink, Ray asked if I would like to come over for lunch at Glen Oak C.C. sometime within the next couple of days. Well, when you are a young superintendent and a dean of superintendents asks you to come to lunch, the answer is yes! During lunch at Glen Oak, Ray said that he was going to retire and was wondering if I would be interested in his position. Again, yes!

I started at Glen Oak C.C. on May 1, 1970. It was a strange summer, that one of 1970. Ray and I both came in to work everyday. He was retiring, but the date of his retirement was never mentioned nor did either of us bring it up. He would get the crew started every morning by writing their duties on a chalkboard, but he seldom put down their second or third jobs of the day. After the crew's first job, I would assign the subsequent jobs, but I always phrased it, “If Ray asks you to do something else, please do it and don't worry about what I gave you to do.” After a couple weeks of both of us coming in on the weekends, Ray said one Sunday that it really seemed silly for both of us to be in, so why not rotate weekends. Can you imagine having every other weekend FREE! Once again, yes!

All during this summer of 1970, I was riding shotgun with Ray, learning the course, the manual irrigation system and the all-important drainage system. Our club's special two-day event was called "Round-Up" and was usually held in early August. The last day of "Round-Up," we locked up the shop and were walking to our cars. Ray, as he said good-bye, turned and said, "Catch." With that, he tossed me his key ring and said, "It's yours," got in his car, and left.

From that day on, I was the superintendent. The club had given Ray an honorary membership, and we had lunch together at the club everyday from then on. Although he had spent 34 years as superintendent of Glen Oak C.C., he never once questioned me on any of my practices or questioned why this or that was happening. What restraint he had to have had. But then, I really didn't deviate

much from his practices of turf care. Believe me, I consulted with him on most items and relied on him to find all of the shutoffs for the irrigation system when we had to turn on or off the old manual system, before we installed an automatic system in 1976. On days that I might be away from the course, I would ask Ray to look after the crew and asked him if I should assign jobs. The answer was always no. I'd come back to find the grapevines removed from shrubs or some other detail done that I had been putting off. They were the jobs that had been bugging him, but he never said a word about it to me. What a guy.

When Roger LaRochelle resigned as editor of *the Bull Sheet*, Ray had been retired for about two years, and I think he needed something else to do. Always active in our Association, Ray volunteered to become the editor in February of 1972. That is, after he was nomi-

nated to fill the editorship by Marv Gruening, after the suggestion of Marv by Don Gerber at our annual meeting in 1971. It was kind of full circle for Ray, for back in the mid-'40s, he, Bob Williams, Norm Johnson and Paul Burdett (Jim Burdett's father) got together and thought the Midwest needed a newsletter. And so *the Bull Sheet* had been born.

By that time, I had enlarged the office in the maintenance building, making room for a desk for Ray. It was here that he did the work on the newsletter from February 1972 to July of 1983, when he passed away.

Here are a couple of "Gerberisms" that I fondly recall:

- Comment when it was raining one day: "Large raindrops don't last." I believe we were flooded for three days after that.

*(continued on page 26)*

## COMPOST

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- Comment during one of our lunches at the clubhouse: “Large snowflakes usually don’t amount to much.” His car was snowed in, and he couldn’t get it out of the parking lot. We hadn’t put the snowplow on yet for the season.
- “If you have four school boys working, you are paying four but only getting the work of two.”
- Again on school boys: “You can put four kids to work at four corners of the course, and in 30 minutes you will find them all together not working.”

The following biography was written by Don Gerber, president of MAGCS in 1962 and retired superintendent of Chicago Golf Club.

### Raymond Gerber (1899 – 1983)

To reach the top of one’s profession is noteworthy. To reach

the top of one’s profession from a humble beginning is exceptional. Ray Gerber was exceptional.

Ray was born in 1899 on a small farm in rural Minnesota. His father had died when Ray was six years old. Ray’s formal education ended after the eighth grade because he was needed at home to help his mother run the farm.

At the age of 16, Ray spent part of the summer helping his married older sister move ranch stock from eastern South Dakota to a new ranch in western South Dakota that bordered on the Badlands. Driving cattle across the wide Missouri River on horseback was an experience he always remembered.

The next year, Ray Gerber started his career with golf courses. Woodhill Country Club in Wayzata, Minnesota, was being

constructed, and Ray drove a team of horses hauling and grading the course. He had a room over the local blacksmith shop. During the winter months, he cut large blocks of ice from the local lake using horses. The ice was then packed in sawdust in a building to be used during the summer months.

After the construction of Woodhill Country Club was completed, Ray stayed on and for the first time was exposed to the maintenance of a golf course. During this time, his exceptional aptitude for maintaining reel-type mowers attracted the attention of the Toro Company in Minneapolis. A friendship developed with Toro that would last for over 40 years.

In 1925, Ray married Julia Perry. The Toro Company may have noted that marriage was a stabilizing factor because they hired Ray to assemble and main-

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tain a shipment of Toro equipment that was to be used on a new course in New Jersey, called Pine Valley. After a year there, Julia decided that New Jersey was not like Minnesota; so they moved to Illinois. Employment at the Toro dealer in Chicago for a year found Ray longing to be back on a golf course.

He found an opportunity at the Medinah Country Club, constructing their No. 3 Course. After construction was completed, he stayed on as foreman of their No. 2 Course.

Then came the great depression of 1929. The employment of Ray and many others was terminated. For the next four years, he tried to provide for his family by sharpening reel-type mowers. Ray constructed a four-wheeled trailer using the flatbed of a Model A Ford truck to put his reel grinder on. He traveled to the golf courses in the Chicago and southern Wisconsin area, sharpening mowers.

In 1934, Ray gained employment at the Sunset Ridge Country Club in Northbrook, Illinois. In 1936, he was hired as "greenkeeper" at the Glen Oak Country Club in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, and remained at Glen Oak until his retirement 34 years later in 1970.

Before the 1950s, golf course maintenance was founded on basic agronomic principles that were being taught by only a few men. Dr. Fred Grau, O. J. Noer and Burt Musser of Penn State were but a few of them. Ray never missed an opportunity to hear their presentations. Products for the control of turfgrass diseases and weed control were almost nonexistent except for two or three disease products.

In 1946, through an association with Bob Miller of DuPont, Ray was asked to try a new prod-

*Ray Gerber was always a strong advocate of education. He was constantly attending seminars and other educational meetings. His knowledge provided the basis for being able to have one of the best-maintained golf courses.*

uct, 2-4-D, for weed control that had been developed by the federal government for use on airfields during World War II. One pound of this dry product per acre mixed in water and sprayed on broadleaf weeds produced results that were truly magical at that time. I know this for fact, for I was the one who applied that pink powder to our weeds. A chemical to kill weeds and not injure the turf was something to behold.

Ray Gerber was always a strong advocate of education. He was constantly attending seminars and other educational meetings. His knowledge provided the basis for being able to have one of the best-maintained golf courses. His success prompted Burt Musser to ask Ray to contribute a chapter in a book that Musser was writing, *Turfgrass Maintenance*.

Because of Ray's strong desire to learn, he was actively involved in the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America

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and the Midwest Association of Golf Course Superintendents. He was president of the Midwest three times: 1943, 1944 and 1959, and president of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America in 1950. Ray was quietly proud of the fact that from 1936 to 1983, he never missed a monthly meeting of the Midwest Association or the annual GCSAA conference.


Ray received many accolades during his lifetime and since. These are a few of the more important ones:

- 1971 Charles Bartlett Award for Public Relations
- 1975 Distinguished Service Award for the GCSAA
- 1981 Herb Graffis Special Recognition Award
- 2001 IPGA's Illinois Golf Hall of Fame

Ray also wrote articles that were published in England, Australia, Canada and around the country. By his own accounts, he was a speaker at approximately 100 programs on the local, state, national, international and university levels.


Ray remained at the top of his profession until his retirement from Glen Oak Country Club at the age of 72. However, he continued to be active in his profession by becoming the editor of the Midwest Association's newsletter, *the Bull Sheet*, until his death on July 6, 1983. He was 83 years old.

In 1983, the Midwest Association of Golf Course Superintendents created the Ray Gerber Editorial Award, an award given annually to an MAGCS superintendent for the best-written article in the MAGCS magazine, *On Course*, (formerly *the Bull Sheet*), to perpetuate the name Ray Gerber.

Ray Gerber, you should be proud. 

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