

# Fred Behnke, CGCS -N-



Nancy and Fred Behnke.



*I have a question for our readership. What do Northwest Hills Country Club; “dreadfully, awful long hair;” an Iranian orphan; a school bus; the intrigue of the American Foreign Service; and fresh-cut flowers have to do with this month’s spotlight superintendent and site, Fred Behnke, CGCS and Mount Prospect Golf Club? Answer: just about everything!*



*An artist's rendering of the new Mount Prospect G.C. clubhouse.*

While sitting down to interview Fred about Mount Prospect Golf Club, I soon came to realize that both have a storied history.

In 1923, Northwest Hills Country Club opened for business as the northwest suburbs’ newest golf facility. Northwest Hills was the original name of the Mount Prospect Golf Club. “The identity of the original designer of the golf course remains unknown. There is no record of the course’s designer. Whoever designed it did a great job. It is a very clever, very fun layout—a true traditional, parkland-style golf course. The golf course rests on approximately 105 acres and plays about 45,000 to 47,000 rounds annually. It is a real community asset,” Fred says.

Northwest Hills C.C. roared through the remainder of the 1920s. “In the mid-Thirties, the club was sold to a consortium of businessmen reputedly involved with organized crime. Many fabled and notorious legends soon grew around the club based on the notoriety of their ‘mob’ owners. The apparent front-man and manager of the club for many years, an adopted Iranian orphan, mysteriously disappeared without a trace. Rumors spread rampantly around Mount Prospect about his demise. Area lore claimed that he met his fate, and was ‘hit’ in the basement of the clubhouse. Supposedly, the clubhouse had secret rooms or ‘catacombs’ where heavy-handed activities allegedly took place,” relates Fred, adding, “When the original clubhouse was torn down in 2003 to make room for the new clubhouse built on the same site, no secret rooms, vaults or bodies were revealed.”

The Mount Prospect Park District purchased Northwest Hills C.C. in 1957 and changed the course’s name to today’s version, Mount Prospect Golf Club. Fred has been employed within the Mount Prospect Park District since

*(continued on page 8)*

1981, serving the past 17 years as Mount Prospect Golf Club's golf course superintendent.

He grew up in northern Wisconsin. Fred's grandfather, Erwin Behnke, was amongst the greatest influences in Fred's life. "My grandfather was a strong, earthy man, brawny physically, sturdy in character, and resolute in all his deeds and duty. He was a dairy farmer. It was hard work. For 50 years he would milk cows twice a day, everyday, 365 days a year whether sick or sound, day or night, sun or snow. When I think back about him, I can only imagine the fortitude it took to keep that farm going all those years. A family farm back then was successful only with tremendous acts of devotion, determination and sacrifice. It was all my grandfather knew. He loved it. Farming was all he wanted to do," says Fred.

Fred graduated in 1974 from Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin with a degree in political science. "I had long hair—dreadfully, awful long hair," Fred recalls. "It was

the late Sixties, early Seventies hippie thing wanting to distinguish myself from everyone else while looking the same. The long hair was part of it. After a couple years I got bored of the long hair. It was just too difficult to care for, and I realized that it (my long hair) wasn't going to get me anywhere." Fred has had his current well-groomed styling ever since.

With dreams of intrigue and "touring the world," Fred aspired to become an agent in the American Foreign Service after college. "The Foreign Service never turned out. Their entrance exam got in my way. That exam was very difficult. I couldn't get over the threshold score for service entrance," Fred remembers.

While employed as a school-bus driver in 1977, Fred developed an interest in the golf courses he would drive past on his route, and in who maintained them. "After all," says Fred, "I played golf! How hard could it be to care for a golf course? I thought it would be easy to get a job taking care of the greens." Looking for a way in, Fred contacted Ray

Gerber at Glen Oak Country Club about the greenkeeping profession. Ray advised Fred to contact Bob Williams at Bob O'Link. Fred recalls Ray Gerber saying, "Bob Williams is a giant in the greenkeeping world, and the go-to guy, he'll tell you what you need to know."

"I telephoned Bob and struck up the nerve to visit him at Bob O'Link under the guise that I was interviewing him for the local newspaper," Fred says. "It took Bob about one minute to realize that I wasn't writing an article about him, instead I was feeling him out regarding employment opportunities in his profession." After talking with Fred for an hour or two, Bob offered Fred a job. Fred accepted and started working at Bob O'Link with Bob and his son, Bruce.

Mike Bavier, CGCS, hired Fred as an intern at Inverness Country Club in 1980. It was during this time that Fred met and began dating his future bride, Nancy. Inverness' gardener, whose name Fred can't remember, would cut fresh flowers



Check out Mount Prospect G.C.'s new clubhouse at the January meeting.

from the Inverness greenhouse for Fred to take to Nancy on each date. "Nancy and her roommates thought I 'had money' because I would bring her flowers on each date. Boy, were they mistaken," Fred laughs. "They thought I was some catch, when in reality, it was Nancy who was the catch! I've been in love ever since."

Fred and Nancy have been happily married for 23 years. They have two children, Dan, 20 years old, and Marilu, 15.

Fred considers his innovation, composed nature and the ability to fall asleep quickly as among his strengths. "Conversely, my weaknesses are untidiness and procrastination. I'll resolve in 2005 to work on them," Fred says.

In 2004, Fred completed his year as president of the MAGCS. The impact of Fred's wisdom, knowledge, guidance and servitude for our Association will be felt for many years. "I learned a lot from serving on the Board. I was fortunate to serve with some of the smartest and most dedicated professionals in our industry. It has been rewarding. I'm a better

superintendent and person today because of it," Fred states. "I would strongly urge anyone who has had thoughts about serving on the Board to do so. What a pleasure it has been."

Adds Fred, "I have been blessed with many fine staffs over the years. Brett Barcel, our director of golf, and Lou Ennesser, our director of parks and planning, have made this a great job. Our current ground staff is the best! They are a very tenured, dedicated and talented group and we have fun. I love working here! It's all I want to do."

If he were with us today, I'm certain that Grandpa Erwin would be proud of his grandson. Fred Behnke and Mount Prospect Golf Club—a storied history indeed!



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