

"You've Come A Long Way Bob"

By JOHN A. CALHOUN

It is not often that a man dedicates 42 years of service without leaving a long lasting impression on the people he has worked with and the industry he has served so faithfully. Such is the case with Mr. Robert T. Willis, Superintendent of golf course and grounds at the Pointe Vedra Inn and Club.

Bob's history in the industry began in 1942. As a part-time postal worker in Winchester, Virginia, Bob became familiar with the Greens Chairman at the Winchester Country Club. As a result, Bob was offered a full-time position on the 9 hole course as a laborer. Fifty-five cents per hour was an enticing figure back in those troubled days, so Bob plunged into a career that would soon take him to the top of his profession. It wasn't an easy task though, his first job on the course was edging sandtraps that had grown completely in. Keep in mind that these were the days when sophisticated power edgers and power rakes were far from invention. As a matter of fact, the revolutionary invention of the wooden tee forced Bob to remove all the little sand boxes and water pails from the teeing areas.

Bob must have been in exceptional shape back in 1942, he cut greens with an 18" Toro push mower. After 3 months of toil and labor and frustration he had the whole operation "dumped in his lap". His education really began at this point. After he mastered the operation of the Worthington tractor with the Model "A" engine; equipped with a



sickle bar on the side and a 3-gang fairway rig, he hot footed it over to Beltsville, Maryland to the experimental station to learn the technical side of the business. He had extra time for the trip because of the low maintenance required on his 2 pieces of equipment. Besides that, Bob promised his only employee a penny an hour raise if he covered his job while he was gone.

While in Beltsville, Bob learned that he had Common Bent grass on his greens and Bluegrass on his fairways and tees. This was perplexing to Bob because he always

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thought the Bluegrass was a type of music that he really liked, not something that had to be mowed all the time. He also found out that the only material he could get to control fungus on his greens was BiChloride of Mercury, and the only place he could get it was at the Doctors office. This seemed sensible to him at the time because a fungus sounded like something a doctor needed to treat anyway. Of course, the only control for weeds was mechanical, which was fine because he had to have something to do in his spare time now that he was a Superintendent. When he wasn't pulling weeds, which, by the way, is still a favorite pastime of his today, he was working with his irrigation system. Bob's innovation really shined in this area. He had the capacity to water 2 (two) greens at one time with the portable sprinklers they owned, but increased that capacity to 4 (four) greens with the purchase of a portable pump that he used to pump water out of the local creeks. Of course, he was restricted somewhat to that capacity and volume because of the 1" main lines, reduced to 3/4" at the hose bibs.

Bob's innovation did not end there, modernization and progress was in demand. Ballwashers were the latest craze at the swankiest golf courses in the area, and Bob's limited budget was not going to keep him from giving his members the best of quality. So, he constructed a ball washer made of a two by four, with a hole drilled near the top, and stuck this in the ground. He inserted a rod of three eighths inch pipe tubing, (With a notch towards the



end), into the two by four. Then he took the water pail and hung it from the rod. (These were the same water pails from the tees, he never throws anything away). The final touch was a G.I. brush attached to the two by four so the ball could be scrubbed. This eliminated the necessity of having to lick the ball to get it clean, which the members really appreciated. Their appreciation was so great that by 1950 they allowed Bob to buy his first POWER greens-mower. He still had to mow his tees with a regular push lawnmower though. So in 1952, much to the disappointment of the Winchester Country Club, Bob made his move to Sanford, Florida to work at the Mayfair Country

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Club. By comparison, Mayfair was super modern, there were 5-gang pull mowers, Ford tractors, Jacobsen power walk mowers, and many other modern conveniences. The Cow Barn, however, (which served as his headquarters), was something of a disappointment. The PGA would not hold a major tournament there with such a facility on the grounds. So Bob was fortunate enough to construct a new golf course maintenance complex. (This one even had a bathroom!!!). A new dimension in modern day golf course management was born. The PGA came back and held four tournaments at Mayfair during his stay there.

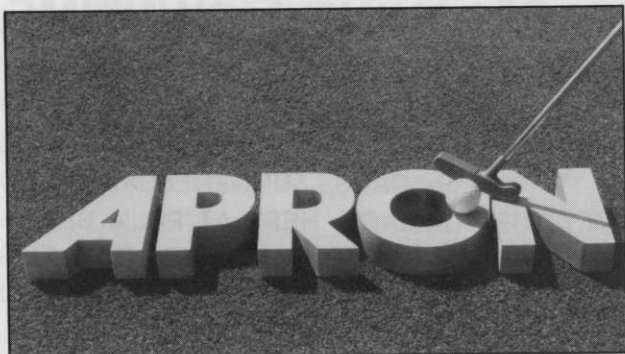
He was also one of the very first to do research on nematodes in the State of Florida. Doctor Vernon Perry, of the Sanford Station of the University of Florida, and Bob did extensive research in the field. Another giant step was hurdled in the progression of the turf industry.

Bob became familiar with different hybrids of Bermuda-grass. The Common Bermuda on the greens was not satisfactory, so he tried Tifton 127. This was too thatchy, thus 328 was planted. (He still likes Bluegrass though, as long as he doesn't have to mow it. It takes a certain breed of man to step forward in an ever changing field and consistently come up with a high degree of success.)

When Bob left Mayfair in 1965 he came to Jacksonville Beach Golf Club. He worked there for nine months and

did such a good job that Dr. Gene Nutter approached him for the position of Superintendent at the Ponte Vedra club. Bob accepted and thus began an eighteen year marriage that will last forever. Bob's touch can be seen in all areas of the golf course and grounds. He was involved in the construction of 9 new holes, and the re-construction of eighteen. His innovations and knowledge of golf course and grounds maintenance and construction have touched the lives of many students and colleagues. It is little wonder why in 1968, he was selected as the recipient of the coveted Wreath of Grass Award. Over the years Bob has developed a style and technique that has been educational, successful and, above all, innovative. (Just a small note here directed to Mr. Robbie Robbins, Superintendent at the Gainesville Golf and Country Club. Robbie, after extensive research I have concluded that, contrary to your belief, Bob was not the first to use four mules instead of two to pull the gang mowers. His budget would not allow the purchase, besides, the extra speed would cause marcelling).

Now, at the time of his retirement, June 30, 1984, after 42 years of service to the golf industry, while he hunts with his new shot-gun, and fishes the shores of Lake Marion, he can reflect on how many things he has accomplished and achieved, and at how many lives he has touched and how many good things he has done with his knowledge and always, ALWAYS, come up with a smile. Thanks Bob, from all of us.■



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