

A TRIBUTE TO WILLIAM G. "BILL" WAGNER

February 27, 1925

January 29, 1988

By
George Jones

The Village of Tequesta, a little town nestled in the woods near the ocean north of West Palm Beach, was the home of one of the great men of our state William G. "Bill" Wagner. On January 29th Bill passed away after a ten year bout with cancer.

Bill Wagner was Golf Course Superintendent of the Tequesta Country Club since August 1965. He served the Village of Tequesta as Chairman of the Board of Adjustment. Bill was President of the Flori-

da Golf Course Superintendents Association (1980-1982) and President of the Florida Turf Grass Association (1983-1984). He was awarded the "Wreath of Grass", the highest award of the F.T.G.A., in 1983. Bill was the first recipient of the Florida Golf Course Superintendents Association's "Distinguished Service Award". He was one of the organizers of the Prayer Breakfast that has become one of the major events at the annual F.T.G.A. Conference and Show in Tampa.



Joan Wagner in front of her home. Bill loved his flower beds and replaced them yearly. This past fall, he was too weak to plant his annuals, so his crew from the golf course came and planted them for him.

Although I had known Bill for many years as a friend and of his reputation as a professional, he never talked about himself. To find out more about Bill, I went to Tequesta to interview his wife, Joan, and his associates.

Many of us know Joan for her presence with Bill over the years at the state and national conventions. But, I didn't know her personally or had ever been to their home in Tequesta.



Joan Wagner: wife, friend, confidant.

As I pulled into the driveway, I noticed the beautiful landscaping with striking Begonias and Impatiens adding color to the well manicured yard. Joan was warm and receptive as she greeted me. I explained my association with Bill and that our readers would like to know more about his life.

Florida Green: Joan, over the years, many of our readers knew Bill as a strong superintendent, great President of our association, and a good friend. First, tell us where Bill was born and raised.

Joan: Bill was born on February 27th, 1925 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. As a small boy his family moved to Quakertown, Pennsylvania. That is where he was raised along with one older brother.

F.G.: How did you and Bill meet?

Joan: I met Bill in Quakertown while I was still in high school. It was a blind date for me. Bill had seen me before so it was not a blind date for him. Bill knew some of the fellows I went to school with. Through a mutual friend they arranged a double date. He had just come back from the Air Force after World War II. We liked each other from the start. Two years later when I was 19, we were married. In our 38 years of marriage we raised two daughters. Susan is married to Paul Early and they have given us two sweet granddaughters, Kelly and Becky. Our daughter Peggy is a C.P.A. and lives close by in Stuart, Florida.

F.G.: How did Bill get started?

Joan: He studied agriculture in high school. Bill was always interested in the outdoors. Just a good farmer.

F.G.: Was Bill always in the turf business?

Joan: No, Bill wanted to fly in the Air Force, but he was color blind. He went through the Spartan Aeronautics School and became an Air Force Mechanic. After the Air Force he owned and operated a service station and did automotive repairs. Then we decided to move to Florida in 1959.

We first resided in Bradenton. At this time Bill was a salesman selling tools. Through his travels he met Dr. Gene Nutter. Dr. Nutter raised Bill's interest in the golf course busi-



Tequesta Country Club, Bill's second home.

ness. The next move was to Jacksonville, Florida where Bill accepted the assistant superintendent position at Jacksonville Beach Municipal Golf Course. Soon he became the superintendent there. With his business and mechanical background, it made the transition easy for him. We stayed at Jacksonville Beach for five years. In August 1965, Bill joined Tequesta Country Club.

F.G.: What were Bill's interest when he was not at the golf course?

Joan: As for hobbies, Bill enjoyed woodworking and remodeling our house. We added a room in the back of the house. He did most of it himself. He enjoyed designing, rearranging and just putting around the house.

He loved any kind of sport event, especially football. This was his favorite kind of entertainment. We would go to the local high school games and enjoy watching the boys play. He would always hire some of the boys for summer work to help them toward junior college. Bill became close to three or four of them, almost like his own sons. Although he was very masculine he was also kind and gentle. He also loved beautiful trees, flowers and plants. He could see the beauty in life.

F.G.: Bill influenced many people during his life time. Who influenced him towards his way of life?

Joan: It was Bill's father that influenced him in the way he felt about the out-of-doors and his basic philosophy of life.

F.G.: He had a strong spiritual faith.

Joan: A large part of Bill's life was being close to God. He had tremendous faith. He was President of the United Methodist Mens Club and ushered at church every Sunday for many years.

Bill had to have tremendous faith. He could not have gotten through the experiences of the past ten years without it. The last five years have been the worst. He had two surgeries every year, Chemotherapy and radiation. He had the best doctors and care possible. To see him bounce back after each surgery was a miracle. Getting back to his work meant so much to him. He really loved what he did. Bill showed us how precious life is.

F.G.: I understand the Town of Tequesta honored Bill.

Joan: They put the Village flags at half-mast for three days starting February 1st and issued a Proclamation of Appreciation for his community service.

F.G.: (Joan showed me the Proclamation.) They appreciated Bill's service to the community.

Joan: It's something I'll always treasure.

As I said goodbye to Joan and drove away from the house, I had a new insight into the man I thought I knew. A man of courage and strength. As I drove towards the golf course, I couldn't help but notice the beauty of Bill's quaint neighborhood and the Village he loved so much.

My next appointment was with Todd Miller the superintendent now in charge of Tequesta Country Club Golf Course. Driving into the maintenance area, I noticed everything was neat and in place, just as Bill had kept it.

Being early for my appointment, I didn't realize until I walked into Todd's office that I had interrupted his lunch. We talked about Bill and the golf course in general until he finished eating. And then we began:

F.G.: Todd, when did you meet Bill and come to Tequesta Country Club?

Todd: Three years ago I came to Tequesta looking for a superintendent's position. At the time I didn't know how fortunate I was to be asked to be assistant to Bill Wagner and work under his guidance. Bill had plans of retiring in February of 1988. Bill did not believe in hiring an assistant. It was a personal feeling of his that any 18-hole private operation did not warrant this position. With his cancer condition he had been fighting for ten years and planning for early retirement, Bill wanted to feel comfortable leaving the golf course in good hands.

F.G.: Tell us about your working relationship with Bill.

Todd: I thought I knew what I was doing when I came to work for Bill. I found out I didn't. Bill taught me so much. He was very demanding. He asked for 110% from all of his people all the time. But he was also being busy giving 150%. When you are working for someone like that, working twice as hard as you are, how could you not produce.

F.G.: How did his employees like working for Bill?

Todd: People liked working for him. I believe it's because he fought for good wages and benefits for his people. There are employees here at Tequesta that have been here 10 to 20 years. It's incredible when you look at employee turnover at other golf courses. In the three years I've worked for him, I never heard him raise his voice to anyone for any reason. One time we had an irrigation contractor out here putting in our new system. We had our controls marked off, dug up, and opened out. There it was 'Don't Hit That'. The contractor not paying attention, plowed right through it. When I came in with the contrac-

tor to tell Bill about it, I said, 'Guess What!' Bill didn't raise his voice, he didn't get mad, he didn't say anything other than, 'Go shut the power off; call the electrician'. He just handled the situation. Through Bill's actions and concern, the contractor felt he was in trouble. Bill had this ability with people. There was this sense he could radiate without yelling or getting angry.

F.G.: What are some of the special things you remember about Bill?

Todd: Bill's PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE he would write for the FLORIDA GREEN while he was President of the Florida Golf Course Superintendents Association would often be very inspiring. An example of one of these messages was, 'Don't ask this association to do something for you. Do something for it. Then it will benefit you.'

F.G.: Bill had strong feelings about supporting the profession.

Todd: He gave everything he could to the profession. He felt it was his moral obligation.

F.G.: Could you give us any final comments?

Todd: I have some big shoes to fill. And I can't do that. No one can replace Bill Wagner. I do

have the advantage of his 23 years of hard work getting this place to operate the way it does. We have mechanics that can't be beat. We have a crew that know how to do everything the proper way and do it as well as it can be done.

Being at Tequesta for 23 years, Bill had improved everything that gets done on a golf course. The program is quite different. A 42-hour work week is scheduled for ten hours on Monday, nine hours Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, five hours Friday, and weekend assignments are rotated. On Monday morning we close nine holes, then in the afternoon the other nine. This way we have all day to spray, topdress, or whatever we need to do without interference.

During Bill's first 15 years at Tequesta he completed a time study on every worker for every job on the golf course. His last eight years he did not do that because he knew how long it took to do each specific job. Jobs are planned so all are finished at the same time. The whole crew is in the compound together, washing up and getting ready for their second jobs. Everyone is ready to go at the same time.

I thanked Todd for our meeting and asked him if I could interview the crew. He explained, "It's an ex-



Left to right: Bill Cousins, Gwayne Baker, Lem Cousins, Jessie Dale, Charlie Ware, Wilbert Edge, Archie Matthews, Todd Miller.

cellent time, they are just coming in for lunch.” Todd guided me into their neat, clean breakroom and introduced me to the crew. The most incredible story unfolds, of many years of loyal employees and camaraderie between them and their former boss.

I explained to the crew I was doing a story on Bill and could they make some comments on their association with him.

F.G.: Let’s start the interview with Archie Matthews. He has been here 24 years, was Bill’s right hand man and a mechanic.

Archie: Personally he was like a father, big brother, and most of all a friend. If you had a problem you could sit down and talk with him. He would try to work with you and work things out. If you were feeling bad he would understand.

F.G.: How was he as a boss?

Archie: He was strong in a good way and treated us fair. If an emergency happened, and we had to be out here at seven in the evening digging a ditch, he would be right in there with us digging. We respected him for that. He never sat around and waited for the job to be done, he was right there with us.

F.G.: Anything else you can remember about Bill?

Archie: He would make things clear to the board or members. He had a way of explaining things so that anyone could understand it.

F.G.: Charlie Ware has also been here 24 years. Charlie, what did you think of Bill as a boss?

Charlie: Oh fine, He was a good man that did a good job and there is no doubt about it. He expected a days work for a days pay.

F.G.: Len Cousins has worked here 13 years as a mechanic.

Len: Well, near the end when Bill was having a bad day, he growled at me and Archie about something. But then he came back later and said: ‘Come here, I want to talk to you!’ He put his arms around our shoulders and said, ‘Now look, you are the last two guys I want to holler at.’ Even though Bill was feeling bad, he didn’t want to dwell on it or bother us with his feelings.

F.G.: Berchie Cousins has been here five years. Are you and Len Cousins related?

Berchie: Yes. We’re first cousins. (A chuckle from everyone.)

F.G.: Any comments?

Berchie: Everything I’ve learned about grass, I’ve

learned from Bill. If there was anything else I asked him and he didn’t know it, he would get the answer for me. He was that way with everyone.

F.G.: Ron Worcester is a ten year employee.

Ron: I still look for him to come back. He’s been gone so often and managed to come back from each operation. You just look. That was him out there and this was his course. I expect to turn around and see him. The way the Village honored him says a lot about the man.

F.G.: Caleb Christian has been here five years.

Caleb: I worked here for five years and left for four years. I came back to settle affairs when my parents died. I needed a job. My wife was expecting a baby. Mr. Wagner hired me without hesitation. I have known Mr. and Mrs. Wagner for as long as I can remember. Mrs. Wagner taught Sunday School to me and my two sisters. Mr. Wagner knew what he had taught me and my capabilities. He gave me a wage we could live on.

F.G.: Can you tell us any past experiences?

Caleb: When I was first here and learning, I drove the F-10 into a tree. I wrecked it good, as Archie can remember. Mr. Wagner was upset, but he didn’t holler at me. He was more of a father figure and made sure we learned by our mistakes. I guess he always seemed like a father to me and I a son to him. He had the father-patience. That’s why I enjoyed coming back.

F.G.: Wilbert Edge is employed here 18½ years.

Wilbert: He was a good employer and a friend. I was 18 when I started and he guided me straight. He would be the first person I would go to if I had a problem. If any of us would get out of hand, he would let you know that there’s nothing that couldn’t be solved. I got close to him. He brought the message to me when my father died. I began to rely on him. He was also like a father to me.

F.G.: Gwayne Baker, new on the crew, 1½ years.

Gwayne: He was a strong man in spirit. Even when he was very ill he would give you a strong handshake.

As I got up to leave, the crew offered me some cookies. They said Mrs. Wagner brought them by. They said she was always doing nice things for the crew.

Todd took me to the club to interview the office people Bill worked with.

F.G.: Kathleen Walls, 17 years.

Kathleen: He was a very fine man. He was considerate and polite. Never hurried you. A gentleman through and through. He would fight for his men to make sure they got what he thought they needed. He never complained, and was always cheerful and positive. Even when we knew he was suffering. I would think to myself that he did so well because he was a man of deep faith. Come along Christmas or a special event, he would get the Club Manager to have the kitchen cook up something for the crew. He always showed his appreciation and loyalty to his employees. His daughter, Peggy, does my income taxes.

F.G.: Estella Walker, 17 years.

Estella: Bill was a hard working man. He was excellent in business matters. Very articulate. I remember about six months ago he was talking about his retirement which would have been in February. He was looking forward to going to North Carolina and doing something with a property he had bought.

F.G.: Betty Harper, 5 years.

Betty: A couple of years ago, after an operation on his face, he grew a beard. We all kidded with him about being able to play Santa Claus. We all felt the same way about him. He was a terrific guy.

My final appointment was with Ed Ficker. He is the club professional. I met with him at his home.

F.G.: Ed, when did you meet Bill Wagner?

Ed: Bill and I came to Tequesta the same year. I came in February and Bill came in August, 1965.

F.G.: So you've had a chance to be associated with Bill the entire time he was at Tequesta. Please give us some comments about him.

Ed: I'm sure that the people you've talked to have said most all of the nice things you can say about Bill.

First and foremost he was a nice man and a gentleman. He had a great faith in the Lord. Served him well. He loved life. Took a genuine interest in people. Demanded a lot from his crew, and they respected him totally, and worked hard for him. The best description of Bill is that he was a good leader. He got out and worked with his people. Enjoyed every phase of his job.

I suppose, once in a while there is someone who passes through this land that makes a great impact on you. Because of his strong faith and our close relationship through the golf course, he was this kind of person to me.

As you know he was so active in your association and affairs. He was also interested in the make-up of the P.G.A. We had numerous conversations on the organization itself. He was interested in who organized it and its structure. He got some of his ideas for the Superintendents Association through the structure of the P.G.A. We had some nice conversations about both organizations. We shared a lot there. I was involved at one time as Vice President of the National Board. Our one-on-one conversations were on golf business in general, particularly about our operations at Tequesta Country Club. We didn't have regular meetings. We had one-on-one meetings almost daily; just short ones, and discussed a variety of things. I feel we had the best pro and superintendent relationship around.



Todd Miller and Ed Ficker.

F.G.: What kind of man did you perceive him to be in his work?

Ed: Bill was a very detailed man, when it came to undertaking new budgets and putting in a new irrigation system. He took pictures and made notes and diagrams. What he did he did well. Particularly when we put in new greens a few years ago. He was out there every minute watching the mixing of peat moss and sand, making sure the distribution was just right. That's just the kind of man he was.

The club gave us a combined 20th Year Anniversary Party and I remember Bill giving such a nice talk to the people. It just floored everyone. He could present

himself so well. He also had a flair for writing. His letters were also presented very well.

F.G.: What was it like the first year you and Bill were in Tequesta?

Ed: There was not much here 23 years ago. Only one food store, the Greater Gator, in Riviera Beach. All the bridges have been rebuilt. They were little old rickety bridges . . . even on U.S.1.

Tequesta experienced very slow growth the first few years we were here. The members had just taken over a year or so before we arrived. I think it was a good

time to come here. It was just starting to grow. The area experienced moderate growth the first ten or twelve years. Then it started to grow rapidly. The Village of Tequesta will never become commercial. It's just a nice quaint village.

F.G.: Thank you Ed for inviting me into your home and helping us pay tribute to Bill Wagner.

As I made the long trip back to Ft. Lauderdale I felt I knew a little more about this great man. Bill Wagner contributed immensely to our organization. He gave great quality of life to everything and everyone he touched. ■



As the sun sets over Tequesta Country Club . . . So long for now Bill, we love you and we will miss you.