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WAYBACK WHEN ...

At the risk of being accused of being fixated on things that happened 20 years ago, I'd like to take you on a magical mystery tour into our industry's past.

For all of you of a certain age who grew up watching Rocky and Bullwinkle on TV, please pretend you're Sherman, and I'll be Mr. Peabody. (Editor's note to young readers: Google "Mr. Peabody" before reading this column, and we'll be on the same page.)

Now, let's fire up the WABAC (pronounced "wayback") machine and return to the interesting times of the late 1980s. Golf is a punching bag for environmentalists in the U.S. and around the globe. Senators Harry Reid and Joe Lieberman are holding congressional hearings about our "large-scale misuse" of pesticides. We're being accused of killing a nice young Navy lieutenant at a golf club in Maryland by overapplying a "dangerous" fungicide. Articles are appearing regularly in publications about how we're destroying wetlands and decimating populations of cute, fuzzy little animals and adorable waterfowl. A lunatic from Japan is gaining worldwide fame and massive media exposure for starting the "global antigolf movement" to combat the reprehensible notion that people should be able to enjoy hitting a little white ball around a well-maintained open green space.

That all seems crazy now, but frankly, we were an easy target. We had painted a big bull's-eye on ourselves because of our cultural status. We were an elitist pastime that quietly excluded minorities and seemed to most Americans to be a gigantic gated community they didn't have a password to access. Our business was largely designed for wealthy, white males. Of the 11,000 or so golf facilities of the day, almost half were private and completely inaccessible to the average Joe who just wanted to smack some balls around and drink a couple of beers. Those customers often were relegated to crappy municipal courses where you showed up before dawn on Saturday morning and waited an eternity to squeeze in a

six-hour round.

In the late 1980s, the golf business was shocked – shocked, I tell you – to find that environmental advocates would criticize us for our use of what they claimed were toxic, synthetic pesticides for purely "aesthetic" reasons. "How dare they!" we harrumphed collectively. "What could possibly be wrong with products made with completely natural ingredients like cadmium, mercury and arsenic?" Ummm ... oops.

Fortunately, despite the indignation of club officials and the half-assed lobbying efforts of those of us who were getting paid to defend the industry, most superintendents were already happily moving toward less-toxic products. The chemical manufacturers responded quickly by introducing compounds that achieved the same goals with far less persistence and mobility. By the mid-90s, most of the bad stuff was largely gone, and most courses demonstrated great conditions could be achieved with little if any harm to the environment.

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Yet, the cloud of suspicion created by that brouhaha 20 years ago continued to haunt us. The stain of pesticides always seemed to mark us whenever a new construction project was proposed in a sensitive area or whenever a neighboring homeowner's beloved pet poodle developed a mild case of diarrhea.

People – not just rabid activists – continued to ask: Are the pesticides you use to make these courses so nice really safe for those of us who play or live along the course?

OK, Sherman, let's climb into the

WABAC machine again and return to the summer of 2008. The moment we come back to the present, I hear the gentle ding of an e-mail arriving in my laptop's inbox. Yet another *%@\$! press release. This one's from some flack at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Probably another useless piece of "news" about how they've promoted a graduate assistant to a junior assistant professor.

I opened the attachment anyway, and for about the millionth time in my 46 years of life, I found I was completely wrong again. This bit of news, which virtually no one – not the GCSAA, not RISE, not the chemical companies – paid any attention to, is an earth-shaking item for those of us who've been in that WABAC machine and who know how challenging it's been for our industry to defend the use of pesticides on golf courses. Here's how the news release began: "Residues of two insecticides widely used on golf courses do not pose a health risk, new research says.

"Sevin SL (using the active ingredient carbaryl) and Dursban Pro (chlorpyrifos), when applied at the maximum U.S.-approved label rate and followed with irrigation, are of little concern to golfers, according to findings published in the Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry.

"After extensive monitoring, estimated exposures to golfers following full applications of two turfgrass insecticides that are used throughout the northeastern United States were 19 to 68 times lower than levels set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency designed to protect human health," said toxicology expert John Clark.

So, according to an article in a major nonturf scientific journal by a serious independent expert who has no skin in the golf pesticides game, the threat presented by even old chemistry such as Sevin and Dursban is at least 20 times below what the EPA considers to be the minimum threshold for a health problem.

Case closed, Sherman. **GCI**

(For details and to share with golfers and colleagues, visit <http://www.umass.edu/news-office/newsreleases/articles/77053.php>)