

EDITOR'S NOTE:

A TALE OF TWO COURSES

The times have not been particularly kind to the golf course industry.

Whether a casualty of excessive development or a result of the recent economic downturn, you don't have to drive very far before you happen upon a fallow course, its fairways and greens overgrown and its once lily-white bunkers breeding grounds for weeds.

But this dire outcome doesn't always have to be the end result. While investigating what happens to failed golf courses when they no longer serve up tee times we were surprised to learn that many of these abandoned properties receive a second lease on life. And contrary to popular belief, many aren't destined to become the foundations for new housing developments, but rather they're resurrected as viable golf courses and continue to serve their communities as parks and nature preserves.

If you know of other examples, please forward them to us at gci@gie.net. We'd like to share them with you in upcoming issues of the magazine and online.

Mike Zawacki, editor

A COMMUNITY ASSET

Unable to meet the demands of running a nine-hole course, the Grant family, with their local government, converted their facility into a community park. *By John Torsiello*



A 100-foot steel bridge still spans a creek at the former Veronica Valley Golf Course in Leelanau, Mich. Today, the facility serves as a community park.

For 14 years, Veronica Valley Golf Course in Leelanau, Mich., was a fairway of dreams for William and Diane Grant and their extended family.

Dedicated to William Grant's late grandmother, Veronica Schaub-Peplinski, a woman who liked to make dreams come true, the course – a true mom-and-pop operation – opened in 1991 and for nearly a decade and a half delighted visitors with its challenge and whimsy.

"We purchased the property with help from grandma and grew strawberries on it for several seasons," Diane Grant says. "When the bottom dropped out of the market we started to wonder what else we could do with the land. We looked into creating a camp-

ground, but there were already two popular campgrounds in the area. One day, one of the guys from the conservation service told us the property would make a beautiful golf course. A couple of hours later Bill was out in the field and a guy went by with golf clubs in the back of his car. That was another hint and we thought, 'let's build a golf course.'"

Which the couple began to do with some trepidation in 1989, first clearing the land, and then seeding the course in 1990 and opening the nine-hole, 3,203-yard par-35 layout in the spring of 1991.

Diane Grant admits she and her husband didn't know what a tee was when they set out to create their course. "Really, we had no clue what we were doing. Nobody in the

family was a golfer, but we worked hard and got lots of help from neighbors, friends and family members," she says.

She recalls her children driving four-wheel off-road vehicles with old bed springs attached to the rear to level dirt to create fairways and greens, and neighbors donating trees to plant on the property.

"We worked from five in the morning to dark in-season taking care of the course and running the business," she says. "Our kids would work there eight hours a day. We could never really turn enough rounds to justify hiring a professional for the pro shop and lessons."

But the public responded and the course was hopping April through October. A few celebrities vacationing in the area – located close to Lake Michigan in the upper northwest corner of the lower peninsula of the state – dropped by after hearing of the eclectic and scenic course run by a friendly couple.

"We made it a family golf course," Diane says. "Each year we would put new things out on the course. We had a 100-foot steel bridge going over a creek, covered bridges, carved wooden statues, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves characters, a bear that roared at you when you came around a corner, and Rapunzel's castle. Some people didn't like it because they felt it distracted them. But most enjoyed what we did and the kids loved it."

In 2002, William was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease and the couple had decisions to make. William could no longer keep up with the dawn-to-dark, 24-7 demands of caring for a golf course. The couple's children had grown up and did not express a desire to follow in their parent's footsteps, although they did spend plenty of time helping manage the layout during its decade-plus of operation.

The Grants reviewed their options during the next two years, getting several offers from developers, although none seemed interested in maintaining the 93-acre parcel as a golf course.

"I think people saw how hard we worked and what we went through to keep the course open and weren't interested in that lifestyle," says Diane Grant. "Some of the people we talked to wanted to change the land to something other than a place where people could come to enjoy themselves, which had always been the intent of buying the land and then managing it."

What occurred next was sweet happenstance, she says.

"We saw a story in the paper about a family



Only faint traces of the former nine-hole course remains today.

that had sold land to create soccer fields and we thought that might be a way to go," she says. "We said to ourselves, 'What if we made the golf course into a park and our kids, grand kids and others could come and enjoy the land. We approached the county (Leelanau) about perhaps selling the course to them for passive recreational use and they got the ball rolling. Turning it into a park was in keeping with grandma's initial desires for the land."

Greg Julian, a Leelanau County parks and recreation commissioner, says the offer by the Grants to sell the land to the county was serendipitous.

"We were looking for land to create a park in the eastern part of the county where the golf course was located. We looked at several pieces of land, but the Grants' parcel was ideal for our purposes. There was a little back and forth and we applied for a grant to help buy the property."

The former golf course, located in Bingham Township, about a 20-minute drive from Traverse City, was eventually sold in 2008 for around \$800,000, with the county obtaining a \$525,000 grant from the Michigan

Natural Resources Trust Fund to assist in the purchase. The Grant family stipulated in the purchase agreement that the land must be used for recreational purposes – hiking, picnicking, fishing and hunting and other such pursuits. Local civic organizations, including the Traverse City Rotary, contributed funds toward the purchase.

About one third of the former course consists of wetlands, while the remainder is mostly open meadows with some wooded areas. A trout stream runs through the property. Because of the pathways and roads that were built for the golf course, the land is quite accessible and somewhat easy to maintain, county officials say.

The county received advice on how best to proceed with the purchase of the land, and resulting establishment of the park, from the Leelanau Nature Conservancy, Julian says.

"They do land purchases for a living and we aren't experts in the field. We did use them as a resource and their input was helpful throughout the process," he says.

The park's upkeep and future develop-
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conomic knowledge that used to be taught. They also need to be able to work with a wide, wide range of people from club board members to laborers. You have to learn that. Finally, the need to learn how to motivate employees and delegate. You're not going to get it done by yourself.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR PASSION FOR FISHING.

I love fly fishing. I love being out in front of the boat looking for tarpon. I was on the Henry's Fork (near his home in Idaho) yesterday trying to match the hatch and watch for rising fish. You're hunting and spotting. I love it. It gets your mind off everything. You can't do it and think about anything else. My absolute favorite is casting flies for bonefish in the Marls of Abaco (in the Bahamas). I spend six or eight days a year down there and it's fantastic.

We do make it part of our business. I love to bring customers and distributors up here to fish. Bruce Williams actually gave me a new title because of that. I'm now the CFO: Chief Fishing Officer.

WHAT'S THE FUTURE HOLD FOR YOU PERSONALLY AND PROFESSIONALLY?

That's my problem. Like I said earlier, I don't want to have an exit strategy. We've had some offers for the company but none that really felt right yet. Coleen keeps bugging me to make up my mind and be home more. That's why we moved back to Idaho. She came to me a few years ago when we were in Florida and, very politely asked to go home to Idaho. After everything I'd dragged her through – she just wanted to go home and I couldn't say no. But I love it here. The fishing and the skiing are

fantastic. We live at 6,000 feet and it can snow 12 months a year. As Coleen says, we have two seasons up here... ten months of good skiing and two months of mushy skiing.

FINAL THOUGHTS?

I don't know what the future holds but I really wouldn't change anything about where I am right now. I don't feel 69. I honestly feel a lot younger. I may keep getting older...but I refuse to grow up. **GCI**

About This Story

As publisher (sales guy) and editorial director (content guy) for this magazine, I debated with myself mightily about whether it was appropriate to feature Gary Grigg in our interview series. Up until now, we'd restricted these to superintendents, architects, builders and the odd Tour player or association executive. We studiously avoided doing "executive profiles" with CEOs from big advertisers because we didn't want to look like...well...whores.

But, after much schizophrenic debate with myself, I came to the conclusion that it was worth breaking new territory because Gary is not your average corporate type. After all, in addition to co-founding Grigg Brothers, he's built or helped build dozens of courses, maintained a bunch, earned both a CGCS and an MG from BIGGA, served as president of GCSAA, spoken at a zillion turf conferences, received numerous awards and generally led an interesting and fruitful life.

Yes, Grigg Brothers does advertise in GCI and other publications and, yes, we covet those advertising dollars mightily. But, not mightily enough to run an article spotlighting an industry company without a damned good reason. In this case, Gary's long career both on and off the course tipped the scales in favor of doing it.

So, that's my rationale for breaking tradition and featuring someone from the corporate world in our Q&A series. And besides, everyone already thinks I'm a whore anyway. **PJ**

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ment will be paid with county funds, and the property is managed under the auspices of the Leelanau County Parks and Recreation Department. The department has a maintenance staff that mans Veronica Valley and two other parks, Julian says.

Hunting and fishing at the park (the property's ponds are stocked with fish and a popular children's fishing derby is held each year) comes under the direction of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

"There are several benefits to adding this area to the county's park/open space inventory," says Leelanau County Administrator, Eric Cline. "It provides a new passive, natural area that is open to the public and a permanent protection from development of this site, which hosts a fairly diverse natural environment. It also provides a County-owned public facility in the east-central portion of the County, as opposed to the other two County-owned parks that are oriented closer to the southwest portion of the County. The park also provides more of a 'natural area'

focus, as opposed to our other parks, which are more active recreation and 'neighborhood' parks-oriented."

There are no plans to expand activities or facilities at the park. A trailer that served as a pro shop, a deck, and some of the statues and farm-oriented folk art were removed because of potential liability issues.

The benefits to the county are to preserve a central piece of property for public use and to develop a year-round park for a variety of pastimes – fishing, skiing, bird watching, hiking, says Mary Tonneberger, chairman of the Leelanau County Board of Commissioners. "As a former user of the golf course, I can attest to the fact that this piece of property will be well used by residents and visitors of all ages."

While the metamorphosis of the golf course into a park was received favorably by most residents, the transition wasn't met with universal acclaim. "People loved coming to play golf at the course and we got to know so many of them through the years," Grant

says. "We had five leagues that played here and golfers got to know our whole family. We couldn't wait to open up for the season each spring. People didn't want to see the course close."

Grant and her husband, who now operate a stump-removal business, wax nostalgic over their former golf course. "Bill was very particular about maintaining the course and we made so many friends during the 14 years we ran it," she says. "One daughter got married there and a son had his reception at the course. It was a special time in our lives. Our kids learned hard work and how to deal with people. Bill sneaks down there on his power cart once in awhile and the kids go fishing in the ponds. It's nice to see people there and enjoying the land."

Grandma Schaub-Peplinski would be happy to see her property still bringing smiles to young and old alike. **GCI**

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