

CFO*

*Chief Fishing Officer

Gary Grigg's journey through the industry has taken him from the potato fields to dozens of golf construction sites to the boardroom of one of the market's most successful superintendent-driven companies...and he hit a few trout streams along the way.

By Pat Jones

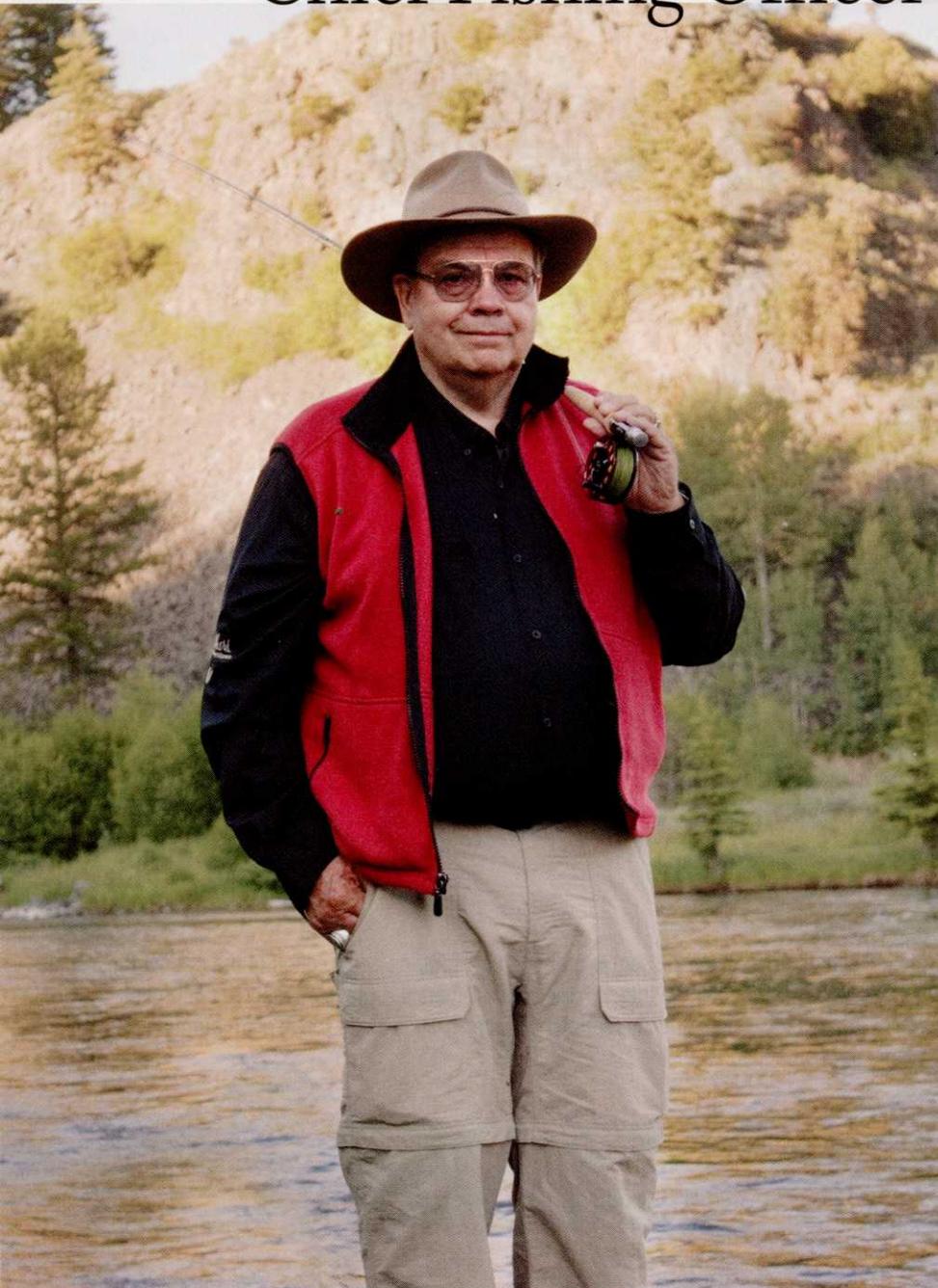
"I'm willing to bet anything that I'm the only golf course superintendent in the world who's had two papers published in the American Potato Journal," says Gary Grigg.

I, for one, am not taking that bet. There are many strange points of entry into this profession, but I'm fairly sure Grigg is unique in transitioning from corporate spud-growing to the pinnacle of turf management.

Grigg is, of course, the vice president, head agronomist, co-owner and main evangelist for Grigg Brothers. For the past 15 years, he's been the public face of the company and the person who's probably done the most to change attitudes about a category of bio-nutritional products that were once largely dismissed as snake oil.

His unlikely journey began in the miniscule town of Vale in eastern Oregon, just across the river from Idaho. His father and uncle had started the first incarnation of Grigg Brothers in the 1930s, selling fresh sweet corn and produce. The little company prospered and the Grigg family relocated to the relative metropolis of Ontario, Ore., where Gary attended high school, played ball and began learning the business of agriculture.

In 1950, the company made a big move into potatoes and changed its name to Oregon Frozen Foods. By 1955, they had grown more and changed the name again, this time to Ore-Ida Foods. You may have heard of it. The family sold the company to the giant H.J. Heinz Corp. in 1964, but the Ore-Ida name remains synonymous with frozen spuds. Oh, and his uncle coined (and wisely trademarked) the name "Tater Tots." Thousands of schoolchildren should thank him each day.



Gary finished high school and, predictably, headed off to study the art and science of spuds – specifically agricultural entomology – at Utah State. He met and married his wife, Coleen, and they embarked on four decades of moving and changing as Gary's career required. Initially he worked for a year for Ore-Ida before enrolling at Michigan State to get his masters in agronomy. A fellow named Dr. Jim Beard ran the graduate agronomy program at MSU in those days and Gary was introduced indirectly to the world of turf.

With master's in hand, he worked for a year for Heinz but his father had become involved in a real estate development in Michigan called Lake Isabella. Despite knowing nothing about day-to-day turf management or construction, Gary was recruited to build the golf course. "I had to have been the first golf course superintendent ever who didn't know anything about golf and had a course to build," recalls Grigg. Fortunately, that's where Bruce Matthews, the noted golf course architect who designed Lake Isabella, came in.

"Bruce told me growing grass couldn't be any harder than growing potatoes...but that wasn't true. It was a steep learning curve." Matthews, who was originally a superintendent by training, introduced Grigg to the local association and encouraged him to join GCSAA. He quickly became involved, was among the earliest certified superintendents and, of course, eventually became president of the national in 1995.

He stayed at Isabella for five years until his father sold his interest there. His self-taught construction experience helped him land at the Lodge of the Four Seasons in Missouri's Ozark Mountains where, with an in-house crew, he built the resort's famed Robert Trent Jones course and got to know the grand old man of course design. Grigg remained friends with Jones the rest of the architect's life and was an honorary pallbearer at RTJ's funeral.

After five years at the Lodge, circumstances changed and Grigg decided to give teaching a try. He spent a year on the Idaho State faculty and loved it, but couldn't make ends meet on a professor's salary. He moved to Tucson to maintain a course there and met another designer, Bob von Hagge, who brought him onto a 27-hole, fast-track project in Albuquerque. That's where Grigg connected with Kindred/Watts construction and began a 9-year period where he oversaw construction of more than 15 courses, including Ventana Canyon in Tucson, the Fazio course at Barton Creek in Austin, Lone Tree in Colorado and the Art

Hills course at Bonita Bay. While working on the Hallbrook Farms Fazio project in Kansas City, he was contacted by a developer who wanted him to build and manage Shadow Glen GC in the area. Kindred/Watts was coming apart thanks to economic woes in Texas, so he signed on at Shadow Glen and built another Golf Digest "Best New" course working with Tom Watson, Tom Weiskopf and Jay Morrish.

Five years later, the course was turned over to Club Corp which made it clear they didn't pay superintendents what Grigg was making, so he hooked up with architect Jim Hardy and his partner Peter Jacobson on several projects before landing at Naples National GC, a great Hurdzan/Fry layout. A few years later, he moved up the street to Royal Poinciana GC to do a 36-hole reconstruction and stayed on to maintain it...his only real non-construction superintendent job. It would be his first and last position in that role.

Just as Grigg settled into life as a regular old golf course superintendent in Florida, his brother Mark approached him to test a prod-

uct that had been developed by a researcher at Utah State (see sidebar). Grigg threw some of the product out and was blown away by the results. It occurred to the brothers Grigg that maybe, just maybe, they could start a business and sell the stuff.

That was in 1995 and today that "stuff" has become a staple of many course maintenance programs as Grigg Brothers grew and prospered just like the company of the same name founded by their father and uncle had a half-century earlier.

Now, as the company celebrates its 15th anniversary, we caught up with Gary to talk about his transition from the profession into the supply side, overcoming the bias against bio products, and what his plans are as he approaches his 70th birthday and the prospect of spending more time fishing for trout than customers.

YOU'VE HAD MULTIPLE ROLES IN THE BUSINESS OVER THE YEARS. WHICH DID YOU LIKE BEST?

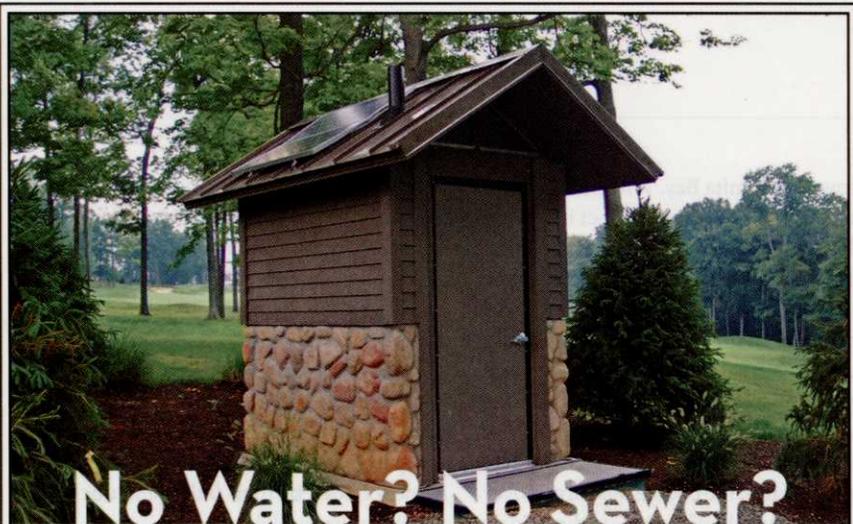
Construction. I built a few dozen courses during my career and I loved it. What I don't

The Tale of the Brothers Grigg

The 15-year-long story of the company built by the Brothers Grigg is a fairy tale in one sense only: It was once considered a fantasy that a company co-founded by a golf course superintendent would become a multi-million-dollar enterprise and a household brand name in the turf market. The genesis of the company dates to the early 1990s when Mark Grigg was selling a line of probiotic foliar products into the ag industry in the West. Among the products was an environmentally friendly liquid nutrient product that was, in 1992, purchased by Toro and relaunched as BioPro. When Toro divested BioPro in 1994, Mark Grigg had lost a line to sell but gained an keen interest in the concept of foliar feeding for plants.

Soon thereafter, Mark met Dr. Gene Miller, a plant biochemist from Utah State University. Miller had developed some interesting foliar technology for farming. Mark was interested in the concept and, almost as an afterthought, shipped some test product to Gary who was a superintendent in Naples, Fla., at the time. "He asked me to test it on turf," Gary recalls. "When he called me later and asked if I thought it had potential for crops, I said 'Screw ag, you outta see what this stuff is doing to my grass!'" They went back to Miller and licensed the product for turf. Thus Gary's Green and the Grigg Brothers company were born. But the company needed investment. In another fairy tale moment, Dean Robinson, Gary's green chairman at Royal Poinciana GC overheard him discussing the need for start-up cash with Mark. Robinson apologized for eavesdropping but said he was intrigued. He then quite literally wrote Grigg a "substantial" personal check to get their fledgling start-up going. Later Bruce Williams, a fellow GCSAA past president and longtime friend, became an investor and board member in the company.

The brothers then took on the biggest challenge facing any new company: distribution. They joined the Independent Turf & Ornamental Distributors Association, went to the group's annual meeting, shook lots of hands and quickly picked up a dozen or so relationships. Within a few years, they'd built a network of more than 60 local distributors who were willing to give the time and attention a "niche" product demands to grow sales. "The key for us has been good distribution and a science-based approach," says Gary. "We spent a lot of money on research... I wanted to show people data and prove how much of our ingredient actually gets into the plant. That's what I would have demanded when I was a superintendent."



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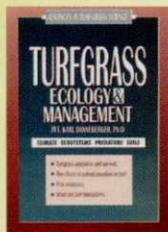


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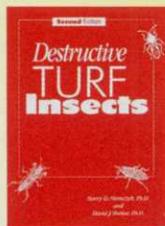
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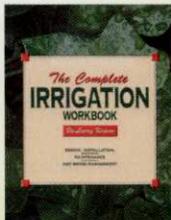
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Q&A

love is when it's done and the members come in and the pro becomes god. Suddenly you don't get a whole lot of credit. That might not be a popular thing to say but I'm retired (as a super) and I don't care.

I've always liked to teach, too. I still do it (at industry conferences and distributor meetings). All those sales meeting I still do are basically teaching. I think that all the talks I've done have helped the whole foliar industry. As Steve Mona always says, a rising tide lifts all boats. And that's fine. I don't care who we help, as long as what I'm saying is science-based.

WHAT ONE THING WOULD YOU HAVE DONE DIFFERENTLY IN YOUR CAREER?

I spent most of my life focused on career. I wish I'd spent more time focused on my family. Johnny Miller said (in a speech at the GIS) that no success in life can substitute for success in the home. I put my kids through hell by moving them around. My daughter went to four different high schools in four years. I regret doing that. I have a lot of respect for guys who take jobs and stay. Having said that, I wouldn't be where I am without moving around.

SO HAVE YOU DIALED BACK YOUR CAREER FOCUS NOW?

Not really (laughs). I'm 69 and still working hard. Coleen keeps asking me what my exit strategy is and I really don't want to answer.

DID YOU EVER THINK GRIGG BROTHERS WOULD BE THE INDUSTRY PLAYER IT IS TODAY?

Absolutely not. We named our first product Gary's Green as a joke. We really didn't think it would go anywhere. It was supposed to be just Mark and I selling it – and to me it was just a way to supplement my retirement income – but then we picked up good distribution and it took off. Mark's the entrepreneur and he may have felt differently, but I liked having a paycheck so it was really hard to quit (the profession) completely, but I did in 2000. I've enjoyed every minute, but I never thought it would be like this.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR SUPERINTENDENTS WHO MIGHT THINK ABOUT STARTING THEIR OWN COMPANY?

Go for it. You always hear people say "don't bite off more than you can chew." My father's saying was, "always bite off more you can chew and then figure out how to chew it."

It takes money though. You have to be smart and have capital and investors lined up or get

lucky and find one like we did.

WHY DID YOU NEED INVESTORS? WHAT ABOUT ALL THAT TATER TOT MONEY YOU INHERITED?

There wasn't any to inherit. As the old saying goes, my dad spent half his money on wine and women and wasted the rest on sheer foolishness.

WHO WOULD YOU SAY HAS INFLUENCED YOU MOST OVER THE YEARS?

Bruce Matthews (the late golf course designer) is pretty high on that list. He took me under his wing and taught me a ton about turf and the golf business when I was just starting. He also got me into GCSAA – he literally took me to my first chapter meeting.

Also Harold Kopljar from the Lodge of the Four Seasons. He took a chance on me and basically let me build the Jones course there with a handful of guys for \$1.2 million, which was a lot of money at the time. My GM there, R. Scott Morrison, is a fantastic guy who really taught me a lot about how to do things right. I'd also say architects Bob von Hagge and Andy Banfield. And of course Tony Kindrick and Doug Watts. They gave me a chance to learn just about everything about construction I could learn and they let me work with Jim Hardy, who was an outstanding guy and a great boss.

Last but not least would be Dean Robinson, my green chairman from Royal Poinciana. He was a great friend who personally gave us the money to get the company started.

AREN'T YOU FORGETTING SOMEONE?

Oh man... obviously Coleen. I met her in college in 1962 and we were married in '64. She came from a wonderful family and has just kept me on the straight and narrow forever. Whenever I get mad, she calms me down. She's done that hundreds of times. She was also a great ambassador for GCSAA. The wives don't get enough credit for everything they do to support us. And she also put up with all the moving around.

WHAT'S THE MOST STRIKING THING ABOUT HOW THE PROFESSION HAS CHANGED OVER THE YEARS?

Obviously the biggest change is the technology. It's unbelievable how much information is available from a quick Google search. I don't think people coming into the business today may have all the agronomic background they need, but they can sure log on and learn it. Just

consider computerized irrigation systems and how much of your course you can run from a cell phone now. It's amazing.

But, the downside is that in 1968 I mowed greens at ¼-inch and they were healthy. The leaf is the manufacturing plant for the grass. The plant just doesn't get enough nutrition at today's mowing heights. Pushing for ultra-fast green speed is incredibly detrimental. But, that's what golfers want so we have to deal with it. The members aren't going to change their attitude.

WHAT WAS THE BEST SPEAKING ENGAGEMENT YOU EVER HAD?

In 1992, when I was on the GCSAA board, Steve Cadenelli was president and he assigned me to go to England and speak at their national conference. It was my first foreign speech and first real overseas trip. I had a great time! I flew into London, then took a train, then a bus, then a cab. Later on I figured out I could have flown into Manchester and been right there. But the level of interest and the intensity of the questions and discussion was a real eye-opener. I made a lot of friends and it got me involved in BIGGA and eventually became a master greenkeeper through them.

OF ALL THE COUNTRIES YOU'VE VISITED, WHICH WAS YOUR LEAST FAVORITE?

I did not enjoy the time Bruce Williams and I went to Jakarta, Indonesia for the old Golf Asia show GCSAA tried to launch. Randy Nichols sent us over there and we met with the Indonesian greenkeepers group and visited some courses, but the country was just overrun with people and dirt. The superintendents were impressive and trying to improve, but I wasn't enamored with the country.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU GIVE TO YOUNG PEOPLE INTERESTED IN THE PROFESSION?

Number one, improve your agronomic skills. They aren't the strongest agronomists these days. Maybe they don't have to be because they can hire someone who is. I think a lot of them might listen too much to company reps – admittedly including mine. The two-year schools are okay, but I'm just not sure they get enough agronomy. The four-year schools do a better job.

I will say that young superintendents tend to be more technologically advanced and better communicators – which is extremely important – but they just don't have the agro-

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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**

COVER STORY (continued from page 45)

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**

John Torsiello is a freelance writer based in Torrington, Conn.