



**Monroe Miller** is a retired golf course superintendent. He spent 36 years as superintendent at Blackhawk Country Club in Madison, Wis. Miller can be reached at [groots@charter.net](mailto:groots@charter.net).

## GEOFFREY CORNISH WAS ONE OF US

One of the best friendships I have had in my life was the result of chance. Geoffrey Cornish had traveled from his home in Amherst, Mass., to Milwaukee to speak at our annual Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium, and at the meeting's end, he had the chair ask if anyone was going to Madison. I hustled to the speaker's podium and offered him the passenger seat of my F-150. Mr. Cornish quickly accepted, noting, "It will cost me \$50 to fly!"

Although at that moment I didn't know, but by the time we reached our town one and a half hours later I realized what a lucky break had fallen my way. This guy was going to be a lifelong friend of mine. That was back in the mid-1980s.

Geoff wanted to go to Madison to visit close friends of his and Mrs. Cornish – Professor Ted Kozlowski. Kozlowski left UMass to accept a faculty position at Wisconsin, and Geoff didn't want to miss a chance to see them. As it turned out, their home was close to my golf course, and I dropped Geoff at their front door.

There wasn't a silent moment on our trip. My interest in genealogy had led me to New England any number of times, and that led to an annual leafpeekers trip each fall. Mr. Cornish had become the quintessential New Englander after spending his early years in his native Canada. He was so easy to talk to, and I later learned why. His early career was spent with Canadian architect Stanley Thompson and Geoff worked as an apprentice architect, a construction foreman and as a superintendent. He knew golf course management inside and out. And in 1940 he was the golf course superintendent at Winnipeg's St. Charles CC.

We were both veterans; he was of the greatest generation. I never was

able to draw much from him about his WWII experience other than his service was with the Canadian Army and he went into mainland Europe on the first day of D-Day. He fought his way across Europe and into Germany, leading troops as a Major. In my eyes, that service made him a real hero. Like American boys in WWII, his term of service in the military was the duration of the conflict; he was in the service from 1940 – 1945. He suffered an injury but would never give me any details about it. Like so many of that generation, he simply didn't want to talk about it.

Geoff earned his undergrad degree in soil science from the University of British Columbia before the war, and a M.S. degree from UMass in agronomy

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after. It was there he began his association with Lawrence Dickinson and Joseph Troll in the Stockbridge Turf Program at UMass. He may well have known more about golf turf management than any other architect.

He also knew golf course design, and taught the subject as well as practicing it. He was a popular seminar instructor for the GCSAA, and for years taught golf course design at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. In 1987, UMass honored him with an honorary Doctor of Science degree, the same day the governor received one. After that, I addressed my correspondence to him as “Dr. Geoffrey Cornish.” He was honored, certainly, but every once in a while he would remind me “I didn't earn that degree.”

I always disagreed!

I had a chance to walk a piece of property under consideration for a golf course with Geoff. I had heard about his “quick pace” but I had no idea how fast that really was. And he was talking the whole time, leaving me behind and exhausted despite his 30-plus years my senior.

I love stories Rod Johnson tells from his time working with Geoff on a master plan for Pine Hills CC. Geoff was hesitant to tackle the job – he was busy in New England and Sheboygan was a long way from Amherst. Rod finally persuaded him by sending him a fresh air photo of his golf course and a premier gift box of Wisconsin cheese. Geoff's response was typically brief – “You win.” Two other habits point to Mr. Cornish's frugality – he painted dots rather than lines “to save paint.” And he would travel with only a duffel bag – “it has everything I need, including a sport coat for the board meeting.” Ron Whitten and others have written about his disinterest in money, an unusual and refreshing attribute.

Many times I tried to get at “How many courses have you designed?” He never really gave an answer. But there were plenty – his partner and friend Mark Mungeam estimated it at 200 or so. Geoff never knew what to count – new designs, remodels, added nine, etc. – so he simply didn't count. I am sure it didn't really matter to him.

For years, his address was simply “Fiddlers Green, Amherst, Mass.,” Later, the post office must have insisted on his street and number. His home faced a village green in an area of southeast Amherst. A church was on one end of the green and Geoff's green shuttered white house was next to a comfortable library. My wife and I loved to stop in the fall; he always

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## (WEST WATER

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Another legislative liaison for the superintendents' association in California is Jim Alwine, who moved in July to a new post from Stockton CC in the central valley to Bernardo Heights GC in San Diego County.

"We all know this across the board, 20 percent is not a very efficient way to conserve water," Alwine argues, "and most golf course supers in this state are already doing their job with drought resistant turf and wetting agents, so there's been a push to find more of a coefficient for Bermuda grass, rye grass and how much water you should use for certain areas. Golf courses are very efficient irrigators and a 1 percent leak would create a wet spot on the golf course."

"I really hope the 20 percent reduction doesn't happen in 2015, but if it does, that's just poor management," he argues.

The state's water use policy as it applies to golf courses has been more reactive than proactive, Alwine continues, "it was a hot button issue three years ago when we were in a drought, but the last two years have been very good rain years so legislators are not looking at water 'cause water's not a problem right now."

Alwine urges superintendents in other parts of the country who face water use restrictions to have a drought contingency plan in place.

"You start picking areas you know you can do without, some of the out-of-play areas and native areas you can go completely off, like the driving range, out of play areas," he advises, "some of the out-of-play areas and native areas you can cut it completely off if you need to." Then, if need be, you can drop water use by 30 percent in rough areas and 20 percent in primary rough areas, and 15 percent in fairways.

"Greens you pretty much don't

want to mess with, because of the cost of each green complex as well as a host of diseases and other issues that can come into play" he adds.

"Tees, greens and approaches are what make a golf course, so they should be pretty much untouched in your drought plan," he adds.

"Another way to make sure you're using water as best you can is to use water meters to measure the soil, have a weather station so you know what the ET rate is for that day, and if you know those factors and what your turf can handle, tools like wetting agents can be extremely valuable," he argues.

Pressed for more advice, Alwine recalls advice he got from a superintendent he worked for many years ago; stronger turf ultimately needs less water, he points out.

"If you're not killing anything, you're not trying hard enough," Alwine continues, or, in other words let the weaker turf fade away and die and let the stronger turf survive, "some of the poannia in your rough, let it be replaced by Bermuda or rye grass. It's kind of a survival of the fittest mentality and you end up making a very strong turf system that way." **GCI**

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## (MILLER

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insisted we sit and chat for a while, often with a crackling fire in the fireplace and surrounded by walls of books.

And it was the books that interested me so much, too. His interest in history, especially that of New England and of golf, was everywhere. Geoff and Ron Whitten wrote the book *The Golf Course* in the early 1980s, and I would bet it must have held some sort of popularity record

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for books of its kind. I recall Ron telling me that he carried his golf course information in his shirt pocket on a floppy disc while Geoff had his golf course information nearly filed on 3x5 recipe cards! I have all of his books, each inscribed by some wonderful remarks. They are my library treasures.

Geoffrey Cornish died on Feb. 10th of this year, and many kind and truthful things have been written about him. He was recognized with most of golf's awards,

during his long life of 97 years, yet you'd never guess it. He was kind and humorous and loyal and humble. He was an architect and author and ambassador for golf. He was a historian, an educator and a friend to golf course superintendents. It is going to be really difficult to go out East around Columbus Day and not be able to see him. The landscape will be beautiful, the leaves spectacular, but knowing I cannot visit with this grand gentleman makes me sad. I really miss him. **GCI**

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