

DEATH OF WALTER HARBAN

GREAT LOSS TO GREENKEEPING

By
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WALTER
S. HARBAN



ON March 12th death closed the score book of another great friend of golf —Dr. Walter S. Harban. His was a record of good sportsmanship and devotion to the "spirit of the game" that would at least equal any of golf's best score cards. Dr. Harban's concept of the "best interests of the game" was no narrow interpretation limited by tournament rules and abstract mutterings of "sportsmanship." Dr. Harban recognized that the rank and file of golfers deserved some consideration in clubs as well as the small number of best players. At the same time he realized that the greatest enjoyment and best interests of the game included not only consideration of rules and regulations, but also involved course maintenance, since in no major outdoor game is the condition of the playing area as important to the full enjoyment of the game as it is with golf.

An Early Golf Enthusiast

Dr. Harban moved to Washington in the '70s and soon became one of the city's leading dentists. At one time he was the personal dentist of President Theodore Roosevelt. He retired from the dental profession in 1909 and became active in banking and the hotel business in Washington.

Throughout his life Dr. Harban was active in many outdoor sports particularly golf, rowing, hunting and fishing. He took an active part in the organization of the Columbia CC and in the construction of its present course. He later became in-

terested in the organization of the Burning Tree GC and served on its green committee. From 1915 to 1919 he was a member of the executive committee of the USGA, and Vice President from 1917 to 1919. He served on the Green Section committee from the time the Green Section was established until his death.

Dr. Harban was fond of fishing and hunting. He was a close friend of President Cleveland and frequently accompanied him on fishing trips. In recent years he was unable to play golf but continued his duck hunting as health permitted.

Applied Science To Turf Upkeep

Dr. Harban made his greatest contribution to golf through his awakening of interest in the possibilities of applying science to the maintenance of turf on golf courses. Directly or indirectly the development of the vegetative planting of bents on golf courses, the establishment of the Green Section of the United States Golf Association, the control of turf diseases and other turf maintenance problems can be traced largely to his interest and influence.

When Dr. Harban retired from the dental profession he devoted much time to the maintenance work of the Columbia CC. He encountered several problems which



This photo records an important event in greenkeeping history. The time: 1918. The place: Potomac Park, D. C. The event: workmen preparing creeping bent stolons for application for the first time to a putting green.

baffled him so much that in 1910 he sought aid from scientists of the U. S. Dept. of Agriculture. This is believed to be the first case where the help of agricultural science was sought for golf course construction or maintenance.

Some time later Dr. Harban again visited the Dept. of Agriculture and there met Drs. C. V. Piper and R. A. Oakley who were at that time interested in turf for golf courses. He immediately took these gentlemen out to the Columbia CC and thus began a long friendship with far-reaching effects on turf maintenance.

The leadership of Dr. Harban with the support of other prominent golfers with vision and broad concepts of the game finally resulted in the formation of the Green Section of the USGA. The primary purpose of the new organization was to make directly accessible to golf clubs all pertinent scientific information that was available in the U. S. Dept. of Agriculture.

Introduced Stolon Method of Bent Planting

In addition to playing a most important part in the establishment of the Green Section Dr. Harban was primarily responsible for another far reaching development in turf maintenance. This was the application of the stolon method of planting bent grasses.

In the early days of the World War Dr. Harban one morning read headlines telling of the blockade of German shipping. He immediately recognized the significance of that announcement to golf in this country. He realized that the European bent grasses were the only practical grasses for putting greens throughout our northern states. The blocking of shipments of German mixed bent seed and the ultimate reduction of the New Zealand source due to

war he knew would effectively eliminate commercial bent seed supplies. He realized that worthless substitutes would be inevitable.

As soon as he finished his paper Dr. Harban called for his car and drove to the Dept. of Agriculture. There he discussed with Drs. Piper, Oakley and Kellerman all known sources of bent seed and possibilities of their expansion. Other grasses that might possibly serve well in the emergency were also discussed. When it became evident that no new sources of bent seed nor satisfactory seed substitutes were likely to be available in a reasonable time, Dr. Harban made an important suggestion. He proposed that a test be made to determine whether some vigorous strains of creeping bent might be planted by the stolon method, similar to the manner of planting Bermuda grass.

He knew of certain outstanding patches of this grass on the Columbia putting greens. Samples of these he offered to deliver to the Arlington experimental farm if the scientists there would plant them and try to develop satisfactory methods for reproducing them in turf. This was done and it was found to be a much easier process than had been anticipated. By 1918 sufficient stock had been developed at Arlington to plant five greens in the new municipal course in Potomac Park, in Washington. The 9th green at the Columbia CC was the first green on a private course to be planted with this method.

Emergency Method Proves Best

Thus was started as an emergency process the vegetative method of planting creeping bents. Little did those four realize that when the emergency of war was over the process would continue in use,



Dr. Harban (extreme left) watches workmen applying creeping bent stolons to a putting green of a private course—the ninth at Columbia CC, Washington, D. C., 1919.

and before the death of all four of them, that method would provide efficient and enjoyable turf to many thousands of golfers on literally thousands of putting greens.

As the writer last heard Dr. Harban recount that conference and its development and watched the characteristic twinkle in his keen eyes as he heard of continuing interest and satisfaction in that method of propagation, it was quite apparent that he treasured that suggestion as one of his great prizes—greatest to him because other golfers enjoyed it. His mantel full of trophies seemed insignificant when compared with that accomplishment “for the good of the game.”

Harban Pioneered for Brown-Patch Research

Still another advancement in turf maintenance centered around Dr. Harban. In 1920 the National Open was played on the Columbia course. Dr. Harban had left nothing undone to produce the best possible putting greens for the event. Just before the tournament started the turf was acclaimed the best it was possible to produce. Then the weatherman turned loose a short period of the hot humid weather for which Washington is well known. Brown-patch won on every green and finals were played on what were essentially sand greens. Here were greens where nothing had been spared to make them the best and where the most effective methods of maintenance known to date were employed. Yet the result was a complete failure in the face of a most important tournament. The spectacular collapse of

those greens naturally focused attention on the why and wherefore of the injury, and Dr. Harban led the cry for a thorough investigation of the cause of this damage and for the development of some remedy. Then followed the investigation work on turf diseases by the U. S. Dept. of Agriculture and the Green Section, leading to the development of remedies which are now used from coast to coast and in foreign lands as well.

Greenkeeping His Major Interest

Dr. Harban was a gentleman in the true sense. His golf was more than a game for his own enjoyment, for it included years of service to his fellow club members as well as to hundreds of thousands of players to him unknown. His was a democratic golf, reminding one of some of the traditions of the game. Only a few months before his death he met a greenkeeper on the street who had never had the opportunity for even elementary schooling. Dr. Harban begged him to “come out to the house and talk over some of the good old days.” Here was a man, personal friend of presidents and men high in the affairs of church, business and state, who was able to retain interest in his fellowman in all walks of life.

So taps has sounded for the last of the great Washington foursome who, only two decades ago, campaigned on a national scale for better turf with the aid of science. In the order of their passing: Dr. Charles V. Piper, Dr. Russell A. Oakley, Dr. Karl F. Kellerman and Dr. Walter S. Harban.