

Down and Dirty

DOING MORE WITH LESS

When most industry outsiders think of golf, they think of wealthy men and women playing on manicured courses at luxurious country clubs. That's not the image you'll see in Silver Bay, Minn., however.

Reserve Mining Co. carved the town out of the Iron Range of northern Minnesota, where winters are harsh and the golf season is short, to entice people to work in its taconite (a flint-like rock that's a source of iron ore, which in turn becomes steel) mine. The workers attracted to Silver Bay, located on the western shore of Lake Superior, reflected the rock they mined and the area where they lived — tough, hardened and enduring.

The company built Silver Bay GC to provide its blue-collar workers with recreation after long hours extracting taconite pellets from the ground. But in 1983, Reserve declared bankruptcy. The new owners sold the course to the town. As younger workers fled to other cities in search of jobs and tax revenues diminishing, there wasn't enough money in Silver Bay's coffers to keep the course in playable shape.

Enter certified superintendent and general



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SILVER BAY GC

Norma O'Leary and her husband Mike motivate volunteers to do important projects at Silver Bay GC.

Volunteers Stand at the Ready

BY FRANK H. ANDORKA JR.



**NORMA O'LEARY
REALIZES SHE
COULDN'T HAVE
DONE MUCH
AT SILVER BAY
WITHOUT HER 125
ADULT MEMBERS
AND THEIR
VOLUNTEER
EFFORTS**

Certified Superintendent:
Norma O'Leary
Course: Silver Bay GC
Location:
Silver Bay, Minn.
Maintenance budget:
\$90,000

manager Norma O'Leary in 1990, who harnessed the passion of the remaining residents for the course and their penchant for hard work to save the course money and return it to its former glory.

"People were out of work," O'Leary says. "It was a hard time for the town. They had lost a lot, and they didn't want to lose the golf course, too."

O'Leary realizes she couldn't have done much at Silver Bay without her 125 adult members and their volunteer efforts. It's an older crowd, most of whom are long past retirement age.

"Most of my members are retired mine workers, so hard work comes naturally to them," O'Leary says. "There's also a pride of ownership that fuels their desire to help."

The list of projects that O'Leary and her band of volunteers has completed is impressive (and too long to list completely here). With their help, she has:

- installed drainage tile under two existing greens;
- installed an automatic irrigation system;
- replaced three dilapidated bridges with new 80-foot-long structures;
- built a heated shop in a new maintenance building;
- sodded entire surrounds of a newly constructed irrigation pond;
- removed and replaced several thousand square feet of sod in preparation of cart path construction;
- shouldered and sodded along edges of all new cart paths; and
- removed trees.

O'Leary says her initial foray into using volunteer labor hit a snag. She scheduled too many people for a job, and many stood around with nothing to do.

Continued on page 80

Down and Dirty

Continued from page 78

"Volunteers are most enthusiastic when they're actually doing something," O'Leary says. "You have to make sure you don't have idle hands because they'll be less likely to come back next time you need them."

The other vital factor in mobilizing volunteers is to make the job fun, O'Leary says. In return for a little effort on her part, she has saved the course thousands of dollars in labor costs with her small, dedicated army of volunteers.

Since 1990, O'Leary's volunteers have averaged 300 hours per year, with a peak of 500 hours in 1991 during the irrigation system installation. This saves the course between \$3,000 and \$5,000 per year in labor costs.

"We make sure we thank them and let them know their work is appreciated," she adds. "If you combine that with a sense of pride after a project is

completed, it's a powerful motivator."

Think about how powerful it would be to have your members take new interest and ownership of your course in a way they may not now. Think of the opportunities to educate them about what you do during volunteer days like those O'Leary sponsors. Think about the new respect you might garner from those members — and then think of the money you'll save.

Silver Bay GC is proof that the methods work. O'Leary says the next project, once the city finishes purchasing an extra 24 acres, is to build nine more holes to make the course a complete 18-hole facility — and she expects to do most of the work with her volunteer corps.



Two Silver Bay volunteers lay irrigation pipe during a new system installation.

"We know we can do a fair job building those extra nine holes," O'Leary says. "And we know we'll save the club a lot of money so we can stay within the budget."

Here's betting that O'Leary and her volunteers in an old mining town with its blue-collar work ethic will make it happen. ■

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Two aliens, hovering in a spaceship high above a golf course, observed in amazement as a novice practiced his game.

The golfer duffed his tee shot, shanked his second into the rough, took three to get out of the rough onto the fairway, sliced the next shot into the bushes, then used a putter to get it out on the fairway again.

Above him in the ship, one alien told the other that the man must be playing a sport of some kind. They continued to observe him closely, fascinated.

The golfer hit a great shot into a bunker by the green. He took several shots to get out of the bunker and finally onto the green. He putted several times, and finally got the ball into the hole.

At which point the other alien turned to his partner and said, "Wow. He's in *serious* trouble, now."

