

All for One and One for All

Angels Crossing is no miracle. It's just a fine example of teamwork



BY LARRY AYLWARD,
EDITOR

ABOVE

Angels Crossing's team consists of (left to right) Bruce Matthews III, architect; Mike Hill, pro; Bob Thompson, owner; Jim Thompson, general manager; and Roger Barton, superintendent.

Word spread quickly in the small Michigan community of Vicksburg that "something" was going on at the old paper mill site. Then the rumors of a golf course began.

Of course, the main question posed by some residents doubling as skeptics in Kalamazoo County was why would anyone want to build another golf course in already golf-saturated Michigan. And why would anyone want to build a course in a depressed economy?

Local farmer Bob Thompson heard the questions, and he believed in his heart that he had the right answers. For it was in his heart that Angels Crossing Golf Course began.

It all started with the closing of the Fox River Paper Co.'s Vicksburg mill in 1999. The company was the town's largest employer, and 250 people lost their jobs when it shut down because of overproduction in the industry.

The closure also meant a 23 percent loss to the Vicksburg tax base.

"It was a multigenerational employer for a lot of families in this area," Thompson says of the plant. "It was a golden goose."

Thompson, a community leader, knew something had to be done.

"The goal became to try to replace some of the taxes we lost and do something creative to attract people to the area," the 47-year-old says.

Bob spoke with his brother, Jim, about the idea of building a golf course. Jim, an accountant who worked for 10 years as the controller at another course, created a business plan.

The 567-acre site, about half of it comprised of wetlands, had been partially used as spray fields for liquid effluent, the water used to cool giant paper rolls. An isolated area, about one-third the size of a football field, tested at a level

Continued on page 34

ROGER BOETTCHER

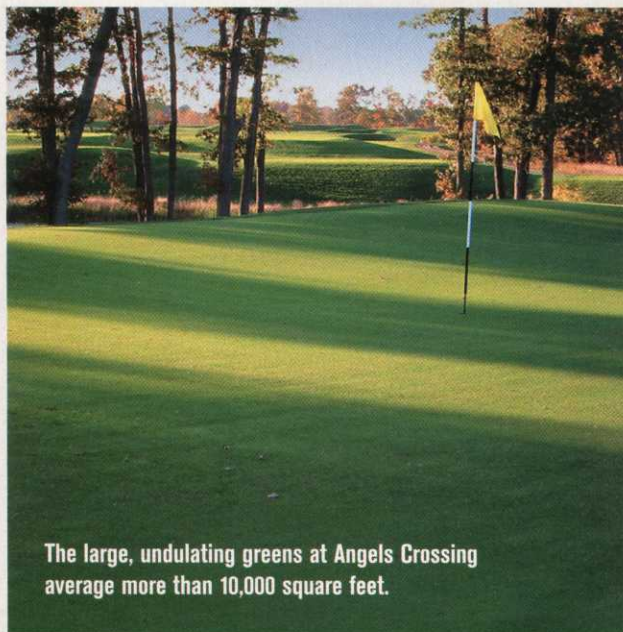


Angels Crossing was built for \$1.8 million. The low price tag had a lot to do with several things, including the fact that builder Dave Herman didn't have to move much dirt.

Continued from page 32

that qualified the site as a brownfield redevelopment. Thompson, who was familiar with the land, purchased it when it was decided the golf course would be built. His business, Fertile Prairie Farms, maintained some of the land when the mill was still operating.

"We used to joke that it would make a great course," Bob says. "It was a joke because the mill had been there since 1904, and the sentiment in the community was that it would never close.



The large, undulating greens at Angels Crossing average more than 10,000 square feet.

"As a community, we needed to respond to the bad news we were given with its closing," Bob continues. "We could do nothing and see what happened, or we could try to turn it into something positive."

Bob and Jim, who's now the general manager of the course, went to the bank to talk financing for the project. After that, everything just fell into place.

"I could write a book about how people found their ways to the project," Bob says. "I don't know if I feel like I had all that much to do with it."

One person that found his way to the project was Bruce Matthews III, a top golf course architect in Michigan and the United States. The Thompsons recruited Matthews to design the 18-hole, 7,100-yard course.

A feasibility study on the area revealed that people would spend around \$35 to play a golf course. That gave Bob and Jim a good indication of how much could be spent on building the course, which was not a lot in comparison to what was being spent on other upscale courses.

Matthews jumped at the chance to design the course. He liked the challenge of creating an upscale course with a bargain green fee.

Matthews adored the land's rolling hills and natural resources. His design has the look and feel of the Golden Age clubs of the 1920s. In his design, Matthews pays homage to some of the old-time architects, including C.B. Macdonald, Seth Raynor and William Flynn. The greens, comprised of L93 creeping bentgrass, are large and undulated and average

Continued on page 36

All for One and One for All

Continued from page 34

a tad more than 10,000 square feet.

Matthews, who has designed almost 40 courses in Michigan, says Angels Crossing is his favorite project — mainly because of the people involved.

"Everybody has had a turn as a leader," Matthews says, describing his latest design as "simple elegance." "It's been a very cohesive group."

The course was built for \$1.8 million. The low price tag had a lot to do with several things, including the fact that builder Dave Herman didn't have to move much dirt. Ponds didn't have to be dug because the course featured so many wetlands. Sandy soil on the property already met specifications for USGA-constructed greens.

"Bruce's real genius in the design is that, like the great artists, he chose to reveal beauty rather than create it," Jim says. "That kept the dirt yardage down while really showcasing the natural features and beauty of the course."

Coming soon to the property is a clubhouse, another nine holes, and teaching and practice facilities. Oh yeah, a chapel will also be built.

In fact, Bob planned to build the chapel on the property before the golf course. He says it will be constructed in an area on the back of the course that overlooks a creek. The fact that the course was named Angels Crossing is purely coincidence.

"It's a great example of affordable golf. It has upscale playability, an upscale look and upscale service for a lower price."

BRUCE MATTHEWS III

Speaking of the name, it was perhaps more difficult to come up with than the course was to build, everyone jokes.

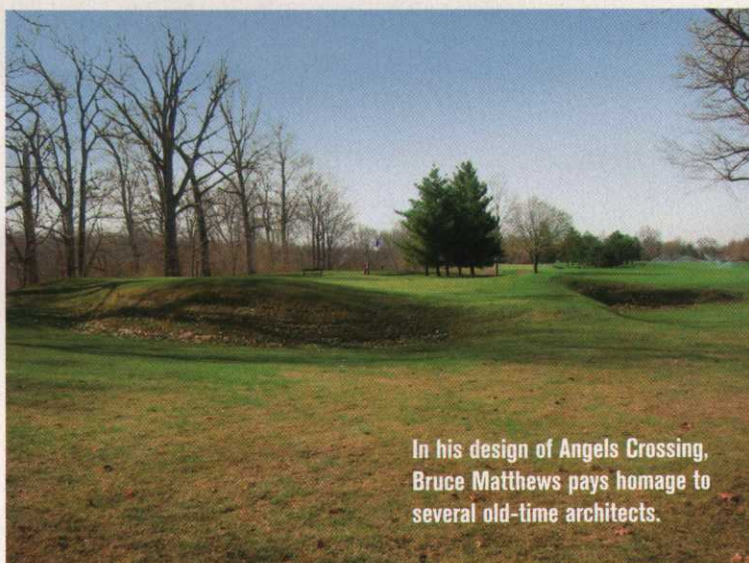
"We had a name for the course every day," Bob says. "We had a few pages of names to choose from."

The word "crossing" was a component of several of the names. When Jim suggested "angels" as the word in front of "crossings" — in reference to Bob's wife Jill's collection of angel ware — everyone saw the light.

Super service

Angels Crossing features five sets of tees. "If you're trying to create something for the masses to enjoy, then you have to build something that appeals to all levels of golfers," Jim says.

The five sets of tees are part of the Thompsons' plan to



COURTESY OF ANGELS CROSSING

delight their customers. They're off to a good start, even though the course hasn't even opened. Last October, Angels Crossing held an open house so people could finally see for themselves what had been going on at the paper mill site. Visitors were invited to jump in golf cars and cruise the course. Such a friendly offering enabled Angels Crossing to make a positive first impression from the vital customer-service perspective.

The Thompsons believe they can make their golf course succeed by providing exceptional customer service.

"Have you ever been to Nordstrom?" Bob asks.

He proceeds to tell about the fabulous customer service the department store's employees are specially trained to provide.

"Nordstrom believes that if you take care of people when they walk in the store, those people will take care of you," Bob says. "[Your customers] want to be taken care of."

Bob wants Angels Crossing's customers to feel like they're getting a great value for their dollars. "You don't make that impression by charging way too much for a can of beer," he adds.

Course pro Mike Hill says he'll treat everyone who walks in the pro shop the same way — with dignity and respect. He'll see to it that other workers in the clubhouse do the same.

Above all, the best value can be found in the \$38 green fee — and that's with a golf car. Interestingly, the marketing challenge Angels Crossing faces is that it costs too *little*. Jim says he has told people about the course's style and features, and they expect him to answer "\$100" when they ask him how much it costs to play. When he tells them it's only \$38 a round, they look at him very skeptically.

"This has happened because the market has been overpriced for too long," Jim says.

Still, nobody is about to apologize for Angels Crossing's low green fee.

"It's a great example of affordable golf," Matthews says. "It has upscale playability, an upscale look and upscale service for a lower price." ■