



A Down-Home

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

Washakie
Golf & RV
Resort is the
quintessential
mom-and-pop
operation

It's lunchtime for employees of the Washakie Golf & RV Resort. The sweet smell of sloppy joe lingers in the air.

Mary Lou Ferrier, who owns and operates Washakie with her son Brian, darts around the kitchen of her home, located a short distance from the golf course, and readies the midday meal. A ceiling fan swirls above her as Mary Lou stirs the simmering sloppy joe. She then places paper plates in a row on the counter, dotting each one with a bun before spooning on the day's entree.

One by one, the hungry workers file in the door of Mary Lou's small home and take their seats at the 6-foot-long dining table adorned with a plastic, floral tablecloth. Mary Lou serves them the plates, and the employees dig in.

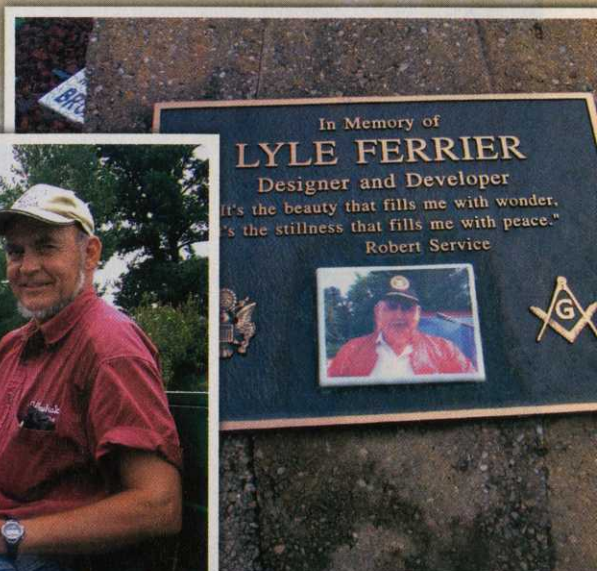
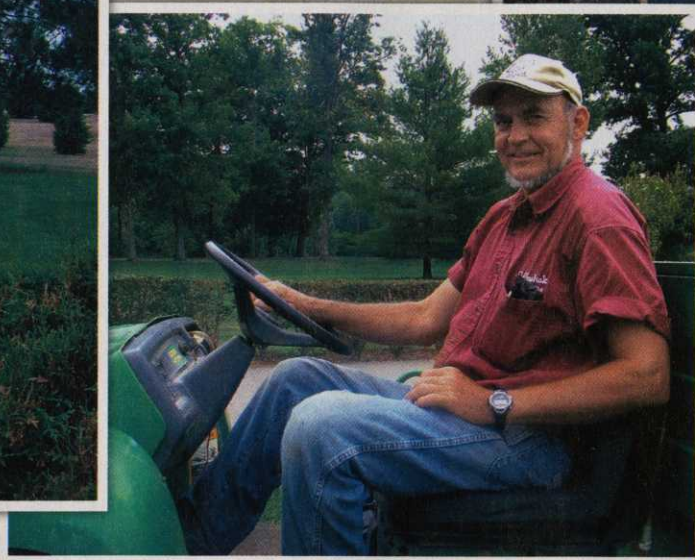
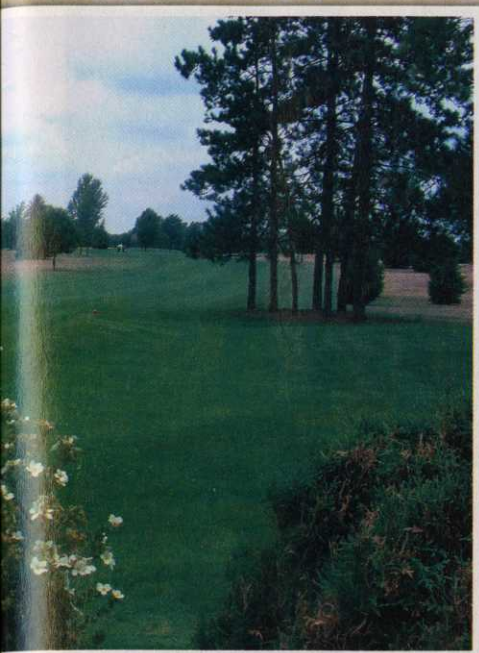
You might think a home-cooked lunch for the hired hands is a special occasion at Washakie, but it's not. The same scene unfolds daily at the course, located about 60 miles north of Detroit

in the village of North Branch, Mich., the kind of small town John Mellencamp crow's about in his folksy song. Just as the clock is sure to strike noon, Mary Lou feeds the crew.

It's a nice fringe benefit for the employees, who consist of the golf course superintendent and his four-man crew, and four women who work in the course's pro shop. But it's more than just a homemade meal for them. It's the chance for the Washakie staff to convene and talk shop for an hour. It's the perfect time for them to get anything out in the open that needs to be discussed, whether it's a problem or a verbal pat on the back.

"We meet every day because we have lunch every day," says Brian Ferrier, who oversees the golf segment of Washakie's business. "So we don't have to have any formal monthly meetings to solve any problems. If we get together on a daily basis, we can put out a fire before it gets started."

Ferrier glances across the table at Lynn Hoffman, the course's longtime superintendent.



Approach

"Have we ever had to have a meeting outside of lunch?" Ferrier asks him.

Hoffman, who's enjoying his sandwich, shakes his head no.

"Ever since I've been here," says Hoffman, who has worked at Washakie for 33 years, "I think we've had three or four meetings."

You don't need a calculator to figure that equals about one meeting every 10 years.

"We talk about things every day so nothing gets put on the back burner," says Lora Reeser, the course's pro shop manager, who has worked at Washakie for about seven years.

Washakie Golf & RV Resort is the quintessential mom-and-pop operation. There's nothing elaborate or ornate about it. Washakie is not the glamorous Augusta National, but it doesn't aim to be.

The modern golf industry, with its fancy country clubs, posh resorts and high-end daily-fee tracks, isn't known much for its low-budget operations these days. But such low-key estab-

lishments are out there — struggling in some instances but surviving, even in Michigan, a state hit hard by tough economic times.

What keeps these operations together are the people who constitute them, which is evident in Washakie's case. Brian and Mary Lou and most of their employees grew up in the village of North Branch, which has a population of about 1,000. They're not planning to leave.

"We're like family," Hoffman says.

On this picture-perfect, sun-splashed day, there isn't much in the way of work to talk about at the dining table. Everything is in good order. Hence, everyone is in a good mood, and there's much giggling and joking.

When the petite Mary Lou serves dessert, a luscious blueberry pie, the talk turns to her Paula Deen-like cooking talents. The crew does not take her free home-cooked daily meals for granted. Pete Mulder, who joined the golf course maintenance crew last year, realizes he'd

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(Center photo) Washakie Golf & RV Resort is no Winged Foot Country Club, but it doesn't aim to be. (Photos left of center) Brian Ferrier and his mother Mary Lou own and operate Washakie. Mary Lou also makes lunch every day. (Photos right of center). Lynn Hoffman is the course's long-time superintendent. A memorial on the course is in tribute to the late Lyle Ferrier, who began the golf course.

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Pete Mulder, Walt Rogers and superintendent Lynn Hoffman are Washakie's only full-time golf course maintenance employees.

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probably be eating something made fast and greasy if it wasn't for Mary Lou's cooking. Walt Rogers, who has worked on the golf course maintenance crew for about 10 years, confesses that his bragging about Mary Lou's cuisine has gotten him in Dutch with his wife. "I get in trouble at home because I tell my wife, 'Your pies aren't as good as Mary Lou's pies,'" he says.

When the pie is gone, it's time to get back to work. Rogers and Mulder climb aboard their fairway mowers and head to the back nine. Washakie's 18-hole, par-72 golf course extends 5,805 yards. It's a handsome and well-manicured course. It's also a good challenge of golf.

Washakie comprises about 160 acres, including the campground, which borders the course in one area. While Brian Ferrier oversees the course's operations, his soon-to-be-80-year-old mother is in charge of the campground. And lunch, of course.

Five generations of Ferriers have worked the land dating back to 1908. The property was originally used for farming, mainly dairy. Later, the family delved into the sand and gravel business as well as excavation.

But when those businesses slowed, Lyle Ferrier, Mary Lou's husband and Brian's father, decided to build a campground on the property in 1973. That business proved a continual challenge, mainly because camping is so seasonal in Michigan. So in 1985, Lyle decided he was going to build a nine-hole golf course to spur the camping business and attract non-campers who were golfers. The Ferriers had the heavy equipment to build a course, so they figured they'd give it a try.

Lyle, Brian and Lynn spearheaded the project. They knew

little about the game of golf, let alone how to carve out a bunker with a bulldozer. But they didn't let that stop them. Undaunted, they studied a few books on golf course design and built the golf course in a way they thought would be fun for golfers.

Area residents thought the Ferriers had flipped for going into the golf business. "They laughed when we started building the course," says Brian, who was 31 at the time. "It was a heckuva risk."

"People said, 'How are you going to build a golf course if you've never played a game of golf?'" Mary Lou recalls. "All I asked of Lyle was that he not mortgage our house."

Lyle, who wasn't the Mississippi-gambler type, respected his wife's wish. He did, however, mortgage just about everything else the family owned as collateral to build the course. But only because he believed his plan would work.

Lyle, Brian and Lynn took turns on the bulldozer and shaped the course. They spent as little money as possible on the project — only about \$240,000. They didn't purchase any outside materials, including sand, for construction.

"Dad was an artist with a bulldozer and could sculpt with it," Brian says. "He loved to dig, and he was great at it."

The course opened in 1986 and proved a success. It did just what Lyle wanted it to do — it brought in more campers who also played golf as well as noncampers who played the game.

But nine holes weren't enough, and in 1987 Lyle had the notion to expand the course to 18. Brian was against the idea vehemently because he didn't think it made financial sense.

"I had a fit," Brian says. "Dad and I had a huge battle over it. But looking back, it was perfect timing to build another nine."

It was perfect timing because a golf boom was just beginning across the country, especially in Michigan. The expansion to 18 holes brought in even more customers.

"While Dad wasn't a big risk taker, he had good insight," says Brian, who lives in an old homestead between the eighth and 15th holes.

Lyle lost a leg to cancer in 1982, but he kept working for another 13 years. He also invented and patented a quick-change device for leg amputees, which is another division of the Ferriers' business and is operated by Brian's wife, Cynthia.

Lyle died in 1995. Brian calls his father's death "a terrible loss." The townspeople wondered if Washakie could succeed without Lyle's leadership, but Brian rallied the crew and has kept the business going strong.

"I was scared," Brian admits. "But if there was ever a time for me and the crew to step up, this was it. Our livelihoods depended on it. There was no other choice."

Today, about half of Washakie's campers play golf, Brian says. Several of them park their campers at Washakie for the entire summer and play golf every day. "With fuel prices so high, they don't want to travel far," he adds.

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The course also attracts plenty of area golfers. "We have 11 leagues, which is pretty good for a little rural course located out in the middle of nowhere," Brian says.

In 2007, Washakie amassed 5,000 rounds for 18-hole play and 13,000 rounds for nine-hole play. Brian believes nine-hole play is on the rise because it takes too long to play 18 holes.

Whether it's nine or 18, the golf course is king at Washakie, and golf course maintenance rules the operation's budget. "The golf course maintenance crew's needs come first," Brian says. "The turf is everything. If we need some equipment, we'll buy it."

That said, Brian doesn't buy anything he can't pay for with cash. He says that's the secret of not getting into debt, which he wants to avoid in these uncertain economic times.

Brian's philosophy is to run a tight ship. He's amazed at what Hoffman and his small crew are able to accomplish on a daily basis.

Funny thing, Hoffman didn't know much about golf, let alone maintaining golf course turf, when he was appointed superintendent of the course after it was built. Hoffman and his crew did get some sound advice from Joe Vargas, the renowned turfgrass scientist and professor at Michigan State University, who visited the course one day. Hoffman also credits a salesman from The Scotts Co. for helping to school him about turf maintenance at the time. He also studied up on the subject himself.

Hoffman can chuckle now about how little he knew back then. He says he fertilized the course with an agriculture-grade blend until the Scotts salesman told him that was a no-no.

But after 20 years, the 63-year-old Hoffman knows a lot about turf management. Hoffman's philosophy is that disease

and weed infestation can be kept at a minimum if the grass is kept healthy.

"If you let the grass get stressed, you're going to get hit with everything that comes along," he says.

While Hoffman doesn't have the maintenance budget or the staff size that other superintendents have, he doesn't complain. His crew may be small — two full-time employees in Rogers and Mulder and two part-time employees — but the employees are reliable. Not only do they do all the mowing, including the 15 acres of campground, they also maintain all of the equipment.

"I don't have to tell them what to do," Hoffman says.

Rogers started at Washakie about nine years ago. He formerly worked as a truck driver for 10 years. He grew up less than a mile from the course.

"When I started here, I didn't even know what a fairway was — or a green or a tee for that matter," he says. "I'd never been on a golf course in my life. But I've learned more on this job than any job I've ever had. You never quit learning."

Like most superintendents, Hoffman spends considerable time at the golf course during the playing season. He works seven days a week. He arrives at Washakie about 2:30 a.m. (not a misprint). He tries to leave about 2:30 p.m.

He goes home, gets a bite to eat and then heads to his other job as the assessor of North Branch Township. An elected position, Hoffman spends a few hours daily assessing the township's property. He calls it a day by 7 p.m. and heads home for dinner and then to bed. He sleeps about four hours a night.

Incidentally, Hoffman puts up with the same problems as any superintendent across the land.

"Some golfers are just inconsiderate," he says. "I've put up signs that say we're growing grass in certain areas and golfers just run them over."

Brian Ferrier knows that mom-and-pop operations like Washakie are a dying breed. For one thing, it's too expensive for someone with a limited amount of money to build a golf course these days. "It costs more for the permits to build a course today than what we paid to build the front nine almost 20 years ago," he says.

Brian thanks the lucky stars for his family's humble operation. He says business has been steady the past few years and all signs point to a good year in 2008.

Brian and Mary Lou are grateful for that. But they know it wouldn't be possible without the tight-knit and hardworking Washakie employees. Brian and Mary Lou can't say enough about their collective work ethic.

"If we didn't have them, we'd probably take a serious look at getting out of the business," Brian says. "They work really hard, and we try to take care of them the best we can."

That includes stuffing them full of Mary Lou's sloppy joe and blueberry pie. ■

Brian Ferrier (far right) says he and his mother Mary Lou (to his left) try to take care of the employees. That includes serving them lunch.

