

THE TALE OF **GARY GROW-IN** AND THE **GRIGG BROS.**



How two Oregon farm boys unintentionally started
a successful international fertilizer business.

BY JOHN WALSH

Opposite: Gary Grigg with professional golfer Bruce Devlin and golf course architect Robert Von Hagge at one of Gary's early grow-ins.



"AT THE TIME, in Idaho, you could drive at 14," says Mark Grigg, president of Grigg Bros.

It was at that young age that Mark and Gary Grigg started working in the agriculture business in Oregon. Their father owned Grigg Brothers Fruit and Vegetables, which became Ore-Ida Foods. Gary earned his undergraduate degree in agriculture at Utah State University; and Mark, who's eight years younger than Gary, attended Utah State, too.

"I had no intention of working outside the family business," says Gary, the vice president and agronomist of the company, adding he intended to return to Oregon after finishing his master's degree at Michigan State University.

Three months before he earned his degree, his father sold the family business to H.J. Heinz.

"I wasn't sure where to go," Gary says. "I hung out with the turf students at MSU, which is how I got to know Jim Beard, Ph.D., and Bruce Matthews.

Bruce asked me to grow-in a golf course, and I told him I didn't know anything about turf. He said, 'It can't be any harder than growing potatoes.'"

Gary was a golf course superintendent for 32 years. He spent 16 years with Houston-based Kindred Watts & Associates during the early days of golf course management companies. Kindred, which owned and managed golf courses, went under in 1988.

"They used to call me 'Gary Grow-In,'" he says, referring to the numerous courses he grew-in during the 1980s.

Gary moved on and spent time at Naples National Golf Club in Florida; Ventana Canyon Golf & Racquet Club in Tucson, Ariz.; and Shadow Glen in Olathe, Kan. He wound up his superintendent career at Royal Poinciana in Florida, where he oversaw a complete renovation of the golf course.

While Gary was making his mark as a superintendent, younger brother Mark came out of school selling fertilizers in Idaho. It was there he met a biochemist named Gene Miller, Ph.D. Miller, an 86-year-old ex-professor, developed fertilizer technology and was talking to Mark about marketing it to the agriculture segment.

Tom Wieskopf, Gary Grigg and Tom Watson take a break from working on Shadow Glen GC in this shot from 1989.

"I was at Naples at the time," Gary says. "Mark sent me the samples. We liked them so much, Mark approached Gene and told him we were interested in licensing his technology in the turf industry."

• • • Early days of Grigg Bros.

The Grigg Bros. company started in 1995, and for the first five years, Mark was the whole company. Then he brought in Gary's son and others they knew well. The company started selling foliar products only. To date, the company doesn't use Miller's technology in anything other than its foliar products.

"They say it takes five years for a business to take off. Sales started to climb. I told Gary, I think it's time for you to come on board," Mark says of when he convinced his brother to leave behind the superintendent profession. "Sales started exploding. We needed to add a guy for every million."

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Grigg Bros.

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"I never dreamed the company would take off like it did. I thought it would supplement my career as a superintendent," Gary recalls. "Mark talked me into leaving the profession and starting Grigg Bros. It wasn't an easy decision because I was a highly paid superintendent. It was a risk."

The Griggs started by selling three products, including their biggest-selling phosphite product, PK Plus.

"It was the first one in the market 12 years ago. Now there are 15 products," Gary says.

In the early days, the Griggs sold stock to raise money. They turned to friends such as former superintendent Bruce Williams, who's now a part-owner of the company. Williams, who invested in the company around 1997, has been on the company's board for 15 years.

"I liked the product line and the partners, so I invested in the stock," says Williams, who's now a consulting agronomist. "Usage of the product line always was based on quality and value."

The Grigg brothers complement each other — Mark has business skills, and Gary has agronomic skills. Mark, who once bought a music store for \$1 and managed its debt, is an entrepreneur.

Today, Grigg Bros. has 11 full-time employees, including Gary's son Jared, who is the company's director of information and communication, and Mark's son Justin, who is the director of operations.

The Griggs' father, who had only an eighth-grade education, was an honest man who operated a credible business. His ways rubbed off on his sons.

"We wanted to carry that honesty forward with our business," Gary says.

As such, four principles guide the brothers' business:

1. Have quality products.

2. Get involved in research. "Any time you don't have data to back up your product, it's just marketing and unsubstantiated claims," Gary says.



Mark (left) and Gary Grigg at the 2012 Golf Industry Show in Las Vegas. "We started this business to make superintendents' jobs easier," Mark says.

3. Hire a good staff. Company agronomists include: Matt Nelson, formerly with the USGA; Gordon Kauffman, Ph.D.; Mike Steve; Steve Sweet; and Tyler Warner.

4. Be environmentally aware. Most of the company's products are organic, partially or all.

"*BoardRoom* magazine ranked us in their Excellence in Achievement Awards," Gary says. "We're getting the recognition based on our four principles."

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International expansion

The company has been growing and started selling overseas — New Zealand, the U.K., Germany, Australia, Korea and China — a few years ago. Mark talked to independent distributors to get them on board. The company now has 60 of them. The company's international business segment is its fastest growing — it's 15 percent of its revenue.

"Superintendents overseas traditionally don't use foliar products," Gary says. "We have everything covered in the U.S., distributionwise. Now we're looking more internationally. We're heavy in Canada, which is a good market for us. One of our top 10 distributors is Irish.

Ireland is a market where we have the biggest penetration overseas."

The company, which has about 20 liquid products and about 35 total, is looking to improve older products as opposed to launching new ones. Grigg Bros. will soon market a pigment for superintendents who can't oversee warm-season turf.

"I have hundreds of friends in the business who've tried our products — that's how we grew the company," Gary says.

With foliar products, Grigg Bros. promotes small rates because a healthy plant requires less fungicide. With a healthy plant, superintendents can cut fungicide rates considerably.

"Chemical companies are starting to add their own type of foliar products in their mix," Gary says. "Tell us they're not looking at our research."

The fact that a significant amount of research has been done on the company's products means a lot to superintendents.

"Grigg Bros. uses peer-reviewed research to support their claims rather than fancy advertising," Williams says. "So doing business with a company that backs up their products and is well trusted in the industry was important to me for my choice of vendors."

"You have to work hard to be successful," Mark says. "Honesty and integrity are the most important things. We prove everything we do." ■

Contributing editor John Walsh lives in Cleveland.