

# LIKE FATHER, LIKE SONS

The late George Littrell gets a Father's Day tribute from one of his three superintendent sons.

BY DAVID LITRELL



Though George never pushed his three sons to pursue careers as superintendents, he was surely proud of the family's 172-plus combined years working in the industry.

*I'd like to tell you the story of the greatest superintendent I ever knew — a man who was not only my father, but also a mentor and a friend.*

My father's life began in a rural area of western Kentucky known as Nick. As a child, George learned how to hunt, trap, fish and work like a man. By age 5 he was working in the timber woods with his father on the other end of a crosscut saw.

George continued the hard work in the woods and on the farm until he was a young man and Uncle Sam called him to go to war. The year was 1943. Dad was 18. For the next two years, Dad's life belonged to Uncle Sam. He endured training for artillery with the 884<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Battalion as part of the 70<sup>th</sup> Division Trail Blazers. In early 1944 he and the rest of the 884<sup>th</sup> boarded the SS Mariposa and headed for southern France by way of northern Africa.

After landing in France, the work began to free the world of Nazis. The battalion endured 87 straight days of combat on their way through France to Germany. After the fighting was over they spent the next few months in Germany before being shipped stateside, where Dad remained until his discharge.

When Dad returned from the front, he made a beeline back home to western Kentucky. It wasn't long before he started courting my mother, Zelda Lee Lindsey, and the family began.

From 1946 to 1956 Dad spent time as a farmer, a migrant farmer and a furnace repair man. After two years of failed crops, he decided to explore the closest job to farming he could find. He settled on golf course maintenance. Back then I think we were called greenskeepers, and Dad quickly earned that title. The first golf course he was in charge of was the old Bowling Green Country Club course in Bowling Green, Ky. It was a nine-hole course back then. Dad was only there for a year or so when the club moved across Highway 185.



He helped with the construction and the grow in. To this day you can see the improvements

he made on the course.

In 1960, Dad got the call to move north to River Road Country Club in Louisville. He worked hard, putting blood, sweat and tears into whatever needed to be done. It was at River Road that my older brothers got their first taste of golf course labor.

In 1965 Dad took a job as superintendent at Wildwood Country Club, where he would spend the rest of his 33-year career. It's where we boys grew up — and where we grew to love the course as much as Dad did. With Wildwood as the backdrop, Dad produced three superintendents in their own right. And each of us took a lot away from Wildwood and the "School of Hard Knocks," as we called it. Also among the crew members of Wildwood were sons-in-law, brothers of sons-in-law, cousins, nephews and uncles. It seemed as though if you needed a job Dad had one for you. Dad was a great teacher and you could learn a lot if you paid close attention. Anyone who ever met Dad could tell you that.

### **Work, and work hard**

Some of the things Dad taught all of us were how to work and work hard. When time allowed, we played and had fun. Then it was back to work. Always, Dad showed us that we needed to be at work on time and put forth the effort needed to accomplish the task at hand, even if it meant working day and night.

Dad also taught us the importance of family. He always led a simple life and got by the best he could. He taught us all various things, such as hunting, fishing, camping and digging

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ginseng. I did not catch on to that last one very well, I guess. Dad used to joke with me that I was not a Littrell. At least, I think he was joking!

Dad never pushed us to become golf course superintendents. That was our own choice. We understood what the undertaking would be like. And after years of watching Dad, we knew what it took to succeed at it. Not to mention, we enjoyed being outdoors.

There were a lot of firsts in the time Dad spent at Wildwood. He had the first automatic irrigation system in the Louisville area. I was just a kid running around on the golf course when that was installed. Until Wildwood came into the picture I didn't have a clue what my Dad and brothers were doing when they left home to go to work.

Wildwood also was the first course in Louisville to have a riding bunker rake. Boy was I glad to see that machine. Carrying a flat shovel and hand rake around all day long really gets old, especially when your feet are your only means of transportation.

Everything back then was done in-house. I don't remember Dad ever having to bring in an expert from the outside to do a job for us. He always seemed to figure out what needed to be done and how to do it. When I say everything, I mean everything. We built and rebuilt greens, bunkers, tee boxes, even cart paths. There was nothing we didn't attempt to do on the golf course, and the majority of the time it was done right, thanks to my father.

Dad left Wildwood at the age of 65 in 1990, but not because he was old and couldn't work any longer. I think he could see what was coming in the way of technology and didn't want to have any part of it. He decided it was a young man's game. He was more accustomed to a simple way of life.

Dad was a longtime member of the GCSAA and a lifetime member of the Kentuckiana GCSA and the Kentucky



**George Littrell proudly served his country during World War II as a member of the 884<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Battalion in the 70<sup>th</sup> Division Trail Blazers.**

Turfgrass Council. During his 33 years as a superintendent he made many friends. These friends include all those whom worked for him, fellow superintendents, some golf course members and college professors. Dad cherished all these friendships.

I am reminded of a time just before Dad's passing when we took him to an appointment to have a brain scan. A device used for the purpose of locating a brain tumor was fitted to his head. It was like a grid that conformed to his head. The scan was completed and the cage taken off. As we were helping Dad to his feet, he asked, "Hey Doc, do you think I can go back to work in the spring?"

Right up to the end of his life Dad was still working. He was a landscaper and groundskeeper for a factory in Bowling Green. Dad was 84 years young at the time and very much looking forward to going back to work. He loved his job and the people he worked for. But God had a different plan for Dad, a man who had worked hard his entire life. God called him home to rest with him in February of 2010.

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Left to right, Tony Littrell, CGCS at Midland Trail Golf Club, Louisville, Ky.; David Littrell, author of the story and superintendent at Iroquois GC in Louisville; George Littrell, longtime superintendent at Wildwood CC before retiring in 1990; and Bobby Littrell, superintendent at Long Run GC, Louisville.

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### **Father, mentor, friend**

At the time I am writing this Dad has been with the Lord for two years and two months, and boy do we miss him. Not just because he was our father — he also was a mentor and a friend. Dad had a way about him. The people who knew him were blessed to have known him. And those who never knew him knew of him.

Now it is up to us, his sons, to carry on Dad's proud legacy. Bobby is the oldest of us and has had the most adventure-filled career. He is currently employed with Louisville Metro Government as its Senior Golf Operations Supervisor II. Now in his second year on the job there, Bobby is in charge of Long Run Golf Course, located in the east end of the county. It's the second course that Bobby has headed up for Metro. He was previously at Charlie Vettiner GC, also in the east end.

Bobby is more mechanically inclined than my brother Tony and me, and he has a longstanding love for invention.

Tony, the middle brother, has worked at Midland Trail Golf Club since 1978. You might consider Tony the brains of the operation. He is the only one of us three who has taken the time to become a GCSAA-certified superintendent, an achievement he has held for more than 25 years.

Being the youngest of the three brothers, I've spent several years of my career

working with and for family. I also am currently employed by Louisville Metro Government as a Senior Golf Operations Supervisor II. My course is Iroquois, located in the south end of the county. I have worked in this position for nearly 10 years. I would consider myself to be the problem solver of the three.

If you combine all of the years of experience between Dad, Bobby, Tony and myself, we tally a staggering total of 172-plus years in the golf course maintenance game. I don't think there are too many families who can claim such an accomplishment.

I hope everyone enjoyed reading about my father, my mentor, my friend and my hero. I wish you all could have known him! Happy Father's Day to all of you, and to all of your dads. ■

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*David L. Littrell is the senior golf operations supervisor at Iroquois Golf Course in Louisville, Ky.*