

## WISCONSIN TURF — FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS...



By Ralph Christopherson  
Founder and President

It was the spring of 1956 when Wisconsin Turf Equipment Corp. of Janesville, Wisconsin was born but the roots of the company stem back to Racine, Wisconsin long before that time. In 1938, I took a job in a small shop in Racine known as Solper Saw Works sharpening saws and sharpening and repairing lawnmowers. I always knew some day I would have my own business but my goal was to become a tool and die maker and someday own a small tool shop. Within one year I really got to enjoy the work in this small shop in which we sharpened saws for most of the contractors, schools, and factories in Racine. The lawnmower sharpening was primarily all hand-mowers with very few power mowers. Racine was a very industrial city and had an excellent, well-equipped vocational school machine shop. During my high school days and a few years after I attended night school. I talked the instructor into letting me rebuild our lawnmower grinder and a few other antiquated grinders. The quality of the work in our shop greatly improved which was immediately reflected in more work.

On May 3, 1941 I took the biggest step of my life. I not only got married, but I purchased the shop and the home which was adjacent to the shop. Frank Solper, owner of the shop, certainly must have had a lot of confidence because all the money we had after buying furniture was \$500.00 for a down payment and the balance of the \$8,000.00 purchase price he put on a land contract. In those days \$7,500.00 was like the national debt. I was very interested in

sports and since I had a twin brother the fellows didn't know if it was Ralph or Ray. So I became known as Christy. After purchasing the business I renamed my business "Christy's Saw & Lawnmower Service." In the fall of 1941 our country got involved in World War II. Racine became a real hot bed in attracting war contracts and most of the companies used saws of some sort and I was flooded with work. On top of all the saw work new lawnmowers were impossible to buy so the old ones had to be repaired and sharpened. Help was practically impossible to hire so both my brothers, Ray and Les, helped out on a part-time basis along with a couple other part-time mechanics. The hours were long but it really helped to live next door to your work.

In the spring of 1944 I was called into the service and was lucky enough to get into the Navy. I wound up on the U.S.S. Patuxent, a tanker refueling the Seventh Fleet in the Pacific. Looking back the duty was a memorable one but certainly not a career which I wanted to pursue.

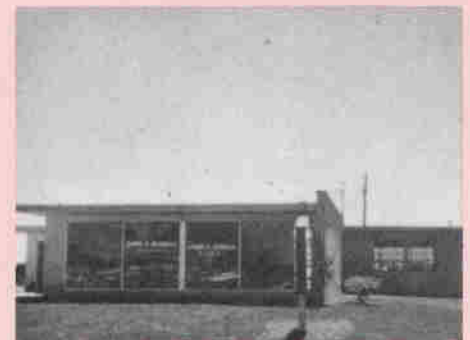
After the war Christy's was reopened in a new location with larger facilities and I took my brothers, Ray and Les, into business as full time partners. The

war years stimulated people into raising victory gardens which continued as a hobby after the war. Garden tractors and tillers became very popular, helping to take a lot of the manual labor out of this hobby. Suburban living with large lawns also was a trend which created a demand for power mowers. If Christy's could fix them, Christy's could sell them and sell them we did. After five years of hard work Ray and Les wanted to try some other venture, so Christy's was sold.

I went to work for the Toro distributor in the state as a field serviceman. It didn't take long for the boss to figure out the fella he sent out in the field with a tool box was selling a lot of merchandise and my title was changed from Field Service to Sales Representative. The work was challenging and exciting and I enjoyed it. The turf industry was growing and many business men recognized the power mower and allied products was the beginning of a new industry and wanted to get on the band wagon. Among calling on prospective dealers, establishing a dealer organization and calling on the turf market, I was one busy Dane. With the new products being introduced into the turf market I enjoyed that segment of the



1956 - 1,750 sq. ft.



1958 - 2,800 sq. ft.



1961 - 5,000 sq. ft.



1967 - 8,000 sq. ft.



business the most. Demonstrating many new products such as sod cutters to the landscapers, aerators and then verti-cuts to the golf courses, along with power trimmers to the cemeteries and other new products certainly beat sharpening saws and mowers all day long, and I was satisfied in making the move and selling Christy's. I did this for five years from 1950-1955 and looking back they were certainly enjoyable, educational, satisfying years. But then the old urge that I got when I was only 12 years old, working on a farm, reappeared and I knew I had to get back into my own business. Brother Ray went farming and wasn't making a howling success and wanted to get back into business again, so I picked Janesville as a city to start for many different reasons. Rock County was rated as number five market in the state and was only 30 miles from Dane County which was rated as number two market in the state, and only 20 miles to the south was Winnebago County in Illinois which was also a very good market. Another factor the Worthington Company, a subsidiary of Jacobsen, was building gang mowers and tractors and needed representation in that part of the state. We both sold our homes in Racine, pooled our limited resources, bought our present lot and built a 35' x 50' building.

My wife got the worst end of the deal because after investing practically all our money in the business we had very little left to buy a home. We finally found a small house with a small down payment and moved our family consisting of four children. Thank goodness I spent all of my time working because that house was so small I would have developed claustrophobia. From past experience we knew that service work was a good bread and butter business and eventually led to sales, so we stressed service work. When we embarked on our venture into the turf business, Worthington only had six pieces of equipment in their line consisting of gang mowers, rough mowers (named blitzers), their model F tractor, a model G tractor, a triplex mower and a 3 pt. mounted rotary mower. The Jacobsen Co. only offered a walking greens mower, a park 30",

a 24" tee mower and a 26" lawn king besides their homeowner line. These weren't enough products to sell to try to make a living and most of the other turf maintenance tools were represented, so we had to turn to chemicals and fertilizers. There weren't too many companies that had products for the turf market at that time but we acquired those that were available. To sell these products you had to have a knowledge of grass so I attended every educational meeting available to learn more about turf. Companies such as Northrup King, I.M.C. Fertilizer, Nitro-form and their agronomist—Fred Grau, Mallinckrodt and Milorganite were all very helpful and had excellent educational meetings. Most of the superintendents during the 50's and early 60's were self-educated men and any knowledge I could offer was as welcome as water to a

thirsty man in the desert.

Beside our service department and limited turf products to sell we also had a retail department selling mowers, tillers, garden supplies, etc. to the local homeowner trade. A year ago we phased that department out to make more room for our growing turf market.

The first two years of business were **very** tough and it was the service department that was responsible for putting bread on the table. I believe that is one of the reasons our service department today is regarded as a very important phase of our business. The first few years our company consisted of only five people—my brother, Ray; myself; my father-in-law, Bill Hansen; Preacher Thornton, who was an excellent mechanic; and Leone Lowe. I was making calls in our \$85.00, ¾ ton Dodge truck which left me stranded on the road many times while Brother Ray took



Curt Larson, General Manager, Corporate Treasurer.



Jerry Jensen



Field day at Blackhawk Park.



We really needed this business in the early years, 1962.

care of the Service Dept. and retail sales. Art Horst, known as Horst Engineering, was struggling as much as we were and we would team up and share a booth at the state park, cemetery and school shows. We worked very closely with each other in those early days of survival and after 30 years that working relationship still exists. Another contributing factor to the success of Wisconsin Turf was the relationship formed among our bordering Jacobsen Distributors which were all young, struggling and aggressive distributors. Spearheaded by Bob Johnson, President of Illinois Lawn Equipment, the Central United States Equipment Distributor organization was formed. Using the first letter of each word this organization is known as C.U.S.E.D. This original organization consisting of 10 Jacobsen Distributors and met twice a year to exchange ideas and how to survive in the turf business. This organization still exists and the last meeting was held Nov. 4, 1985 in St. Paul, Minn.

After surviving the first three years things started happening too numerous to mention. We have five different abstracts in acquiring property. We have six different building permits in expanding our operating facilities. We grew with more and more personnel. During all this growth and expansion we held successful field days, seminars, open houses and spring promotions. These were all great, but to be successful you have to be able to back up your claims. After

30 years, which seems like 30 days in this growing exciting business, I would like to submit my version of success.

It's too bad America's Industry contributes success to financial status. I agree its important—for 28 out of our 30 years Wisconsin Turf has shown a profit. Out of 28 years of business Wisconsin Turf has turned this profit back into retained earnings for growth. We are not the poorest kid on the block but by the growth standards of other industries and enterprises we are far from the richest. Personally, I value accomplishments far above financial status in success. In our own company we have

accomplished many things. In comparison to many other Jacobsen distributors we cover a small territory but Jacobsen has awarded us five times for our sales efforts. We have been given many awards for our service record. O.M.C. has recognized Wisconsin Turf seven times as quota busters. I was appointed as one of five distributors to serve on the first Jacobsen advisory panel. The greens king was developed through the efforts of the panel. Recently we were awarded a plaque from the Wisconsin Park & Rec Society for 20 years of support.

I have seen a man grow from being a mechanic to general manager. We no longer go to trade shows to try to acquire lines to represent, they come to us. Our financial status stems from our accomplishments and I am very proud of them and consider our company very successful through accomplishments. I briefly covered my version of success but when anyone asks what made you successful??? I can answer that question in one word—PEOPLE. Ralph Christopherson and Wisconsin Turf would be a nobody if it wasn't for people. The good Lord blessed me with so many people I can't name them all but I will mention a few. Some of our good customers that gave me their support in our first trying years were Fritz Reinhart, then superintendent of Morris Hills; Mike Lees' Dad, Tom,

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of Tyranaena Golf Course; Dick Lindle, Supt. of Kenosha County Parks; Ray Gronke, Owner of Twin Lakes Golf Course; Joe Lutig, Janesville City Manager and Dick Becker of Big Foot C.C. These were only but a few but they not only gave me their business but good advice and morale support. Among the suppliers Inar Jacobsen, President of Jacobsen Mfg., extended credit far beyond the limits of my financial statement; Rodger Thomas, Institutional Sales Mgr. of Jacobsen, could build a man's confidence higher than the moon and I sure needed that boost every so often in our first trying years; Bill Rolette, Sales Mgr. of Worthington; George Mueller, Vice President of the Devere Co.; Ed Shoemaker with Rainbird. I know very little about the workings of a dollar bill and it was a lucky day back in 1957 when we acquired the services of Ralph Jensen, accounting and business advisor from Burlington, Wis. Cliff Christensen, a vice-president in

Rock County Savings & Trust Bank stopped to see if we needed any financial assistance and the timing was perfect because we were flat broke. The assistance from both these people certainly helped relieve the financial strain. After 28 years we still retain Jensen Accounting Service and Rock County National Bank services.

As far as Wisconsin Turf Equipment Corp. personnel, Jerry Jensen joined me in 1958 and his contributions with very little pay are innumerable. Our general manager and corporate treasurer started in our service department in 1961 and Curt Larson has worked in all phases of the business and he's the guy that could always make things happen. Jerry and Curt are the real pillars of Wisconsin Turf, but they are backed with an excellent team. Briefly I wish to introduce them and the year they joined the company:

My son, Dennis, assistant general manager, part-time 1960,

full-time 1985; another son, Lyle, retail manager and now sales manager 1964; Ralph Derr, service manager, 1967; Chas. Ewers, small engine technician, 1966; Fred Holdorf, manager of internal operation, 1969; Bill Zajicek, parts, 1971; Steve Draper, service, 1973; Jim Knapp, sales, 1973; Curt's son, Brian Larson, field service, 1974; Phal Olson, semi-driver, 1976; Charlene Henderson, office, 1976; Doug Schudda, service, 1977; Myron Seaver, Sales, 1978; Steve Erickson, Sales, 1979; Laurel Angus, office, 1978; Brenda Vermillion, office, 1978; Mike Cook, service, 1978; Debra Messner, office, 1981; Mike Hergert, service, 1981; Curt's son, Barry Larson, sales, 1982; Tom Wiese, parts, 1984; Ron Graf, sales, 1985; Loren Dunnman, delivery, 1985; and Jodie Whittier, 1985.

This is the Wisconsin Turf team made up of a variety of talents ready to serve you.

While talking about people, I have worked with many, many golf



The Christopherson Brothers — Ray, Leslie and Ralph — all WWII veterans.



Field day at Janesville's Blackhawk Park.



Las Vegas, 1984, Jacobsen Distributor of the Year Award.



Washington, D.C., 1985, Jacobsen Distinguished Service Award.



course superintendents over the past 35 years and have observed one traditional characteristic that prevails from the greenkeeper of thirty-five years ago through today's modern golf course superintendent and that is they have all been very very dedicated to their profession. It would be great if that tradition could be passed on to the future superintendents.

In closing it certainly has been a privilege working with the golf course industry the past 30 years and the strides have been tremendous. Thirty years ago the national superintendent meeting would be held in a single hotel with about a dozen suppliers and now it takes a convention center in our largest cities to have adequate room. Wisconsin Turf Equipment Corp. is geared for perpetuation and I hope thirty years from now one of our young employees will say I remember the day when we introduced the lightweight fairway mower and Rubigan to the golf course industry. With the strides that have been made in the past years it's unpredictable what the future holds.

## JOHN JOANIS, CREATOR OF SENTRYWORLD, DIES AT 67



John Joanis, well known in Wisconsin golf circles, passed away on November 18 in a Marshfield hospital. He was 67 years old. Joanis gave a memorable speech to WGCSA members at the August 1984 meeting at

Stevens Point Country Club. His speech centered around his ideas on leadership. He was a dynamic and self-assured leader who once said he spent much of his time at Sentry Insurance looking into the next year, the next decade and even the next century. The daily operations of his companies were delegated to subordinates.

He made no secret of the fact that he felt image was an important part of leadership, and his attitude was reflected in most of what he did at Sentry, including the construction of the SENTRYWORLD golf course.

Joanis was born in Virginia and moved to Wisconsin as a child. He attended the University of Wisconsin—Madison as an undergraduate and also received a degree from the UW law school in 1942. He practiced law in Oshkosh before serving as an Air Force navigator from 1942 to 1945. John joined Sentry, then known as Hard-

ware Mutual Casualty Company, as a staff attorney in 1947. He became president and CEO in 1966, and in 1972 was named chairman of the board. Joanis took a small, financially depressed Hardware Mutual to an international insurance and industrial conglomerate. Sentry has 90 subsidiary companies in wide ranging businesses.

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