

A Tribute to Lester Verhaalen

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*By Charlie Shiley, Forester
Plum Tree National Golf Club
As Told to*

Charlie Wilson, Retired Agronomist

My friend, Lester Verhaalen, wasn't the first superintendent at Brynwood Country Club in Milwaukee. Greenkeeper Bob Farmer preceded him by eight years. However, Les was in on the construction during the mid 1920's driving a team of horses pulling a scraper. He liked the park-like setting and when offered the job decided to stay on as a groundskeeper. He said, "It differs from conventional farming, although there are many similarities."

In July of 1935, Mr. Farmer moved on and club officials asked Les to assume charge of outside maintenance. He accepted with some reluctance because those were still the "dark ages" of golf course maintenance. Les felt he lacked sufficient knowledge, having only a farm background to guide him. Back then, Greenkeepers often were secretive about their practices, and little had been written to give practical help to a novice superintendent.

This brought about a continuous seeking of Turfgrass knowledge, and caused Les to form a lasting friendship with O.J. Noer. In fact, he became an important part of O.J.'s research team. Les established plots to evaluate snowmold and other disease controls. Brynwoods' fairways and putting greens were used to evaluate fertilizers and weed controls. It was at Brynwood that Milorganite first showed superiority over ammonium sulfate in suppressing dollar spot disease. Brynwood also was among the first to practice dormant fertilization and ice removal to suppress winterkill.

Thanks to Les, Brynwood was noted for exceptionally fine, non-irrigated Kentucky bluegrass fairways. They lasted until the early 60's when an attack of leafspot during a summer drought caused injury on the semi-dormant yet still green fairways. The bluegrass rough escaped damage because it was brown and dormant. Les proved it was lack of water that was the real culprit. Where he set a test sprinkler on one fairway, the Kentucky bluegrass was able to outgrow the disease.

In any event, like many clubs before them, Brynwood decided fairway irrigation and close mowing was the way to go. This coupled with more low spot winterkill, caused further loss of Kentucky bluegrass and resulted in annual bluegrass invasion.

Les was a strong believer in organization. He joined the W.G.C.S.A. in 1935, and served as president 1943-45. He was one of the mainstays that held the organization together during World

War II. He served numerous terms as director and on various committees. He had a near perfect attendance and participation record. In 1941, he joined the G.C.S.A.A., and faithfully attended all of their shows and Turfgrass conferences until retirement from Brynwood in 1971. He was pleased to become a quarter century member in 1966. At his death, he was in the 47th year of membership in the national association.

He was a member of the Midwest Regional Turfgrass Association from its inception in 1946, and regularly attended all of their conferences and field days. He served one term as director of the Midwest Foundation.

Even retirement, brought on by a serious operation, failed to stop Les. Following his recovery, he continued to serve Brynwood for another decade in a part-time capacity. Better than half a century of total involvement in growing grass for one golf course is a record that may not soon be broken. It carried Les from the dark ages to the age of enlightenment. The time span went from horses to Ford Model T's and A's with large ring gears and steel wheels for traction. Any moisture much heavier than a "wet dew" immobilized the equipment.

Greens, tees and high banks were mowed with hand pushed mowers. Spray equipment was a wheeled barrel with five foot boom (a pipe with holes drilled in it). This was manually pulled across the green. Then came proportioners and the McLain hand pump.

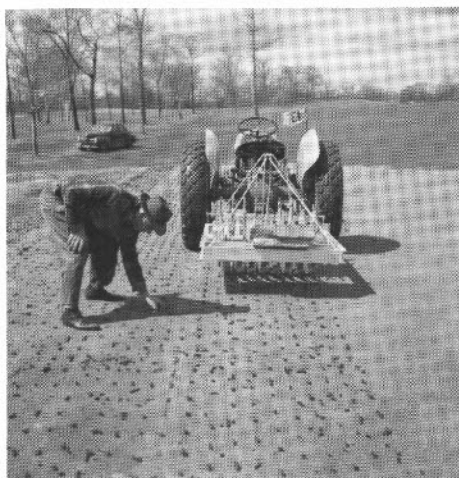
Some of the early fungicides Les worked with were Bordeaux Mixture, calomel and corrosive sublimate. Cadmium compounds followed the mercurials. Bordeaux Mixture was dropped because of copper toxicity to the grass. Early fertilizers were topdressing and barnyard manure. Next came ammonium sulfate and Milorganite. Superintendents made their own fertilizer mixtures by adding superphosphate and muriate of potash to the nitrogen source.

The earliest weed control was by hand, or a spot treatment of a drop or two of gasoline applied from an oil can. Arsenical use preceded 2, 4-D, at first available in a wax which had to be melted before it would dissolve in sprayable form.

Earthworms were controlled with "Electric Worm Eradicator". There was nothing electric about it. The liquid agitated the worms causing them to cast and die by the hundreds, where they were removed by "worm rakes",



Les with aerifier at Brynwood C.C., early 1950's.



Les with Stuppel, Smith, et. al. at Brynwood C.C., September 1958.

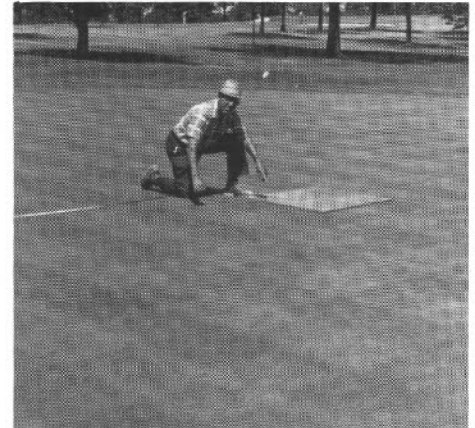


Les demonstrating hand duster at Brynwood C.C., August 1955.

specially designed for this purpose. At each tee was a box containing two pails—one for water to wash the golf ball, the other for sand to tee it up. The West Point Aerifier didn't come along until after World War II. Prior to then, hand forks were used to alleviate compaction and localized dry spots.

Lester Verhaalen leaves behind his devoted wife, Edna, their two children, Ronnie and Karen, seven grandchildren and two great grandchildren. Ronnie, and Karen's husband, Roger Schultz, were golf course superintendents for a time, but left the profession for other endeavors. Our sympathy goes out to all of them.

Les will, of course, be missed. But more than that he will be remembered for his lasting impact on the grass for golf growing profession.



Les with MAPLES-TUFTS measuring board at Brynwood C.C., June 1970.

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