



Assaulted

By Monroe S. Miller

Assaulted — a strong word that brings to mind the kind of personal violence all of us hope we are never subjected to at any time in our lives. Maybe it's too strong a word for a chronic problem those of us responsible for the well being of a golf course confront too often — vandalism. Yet this word is how I feel many times, usually in the morning, when I discover that our golf course has once again been the nighttime playground of destructive people. And assault is exactly what my golf course has suffered so many, many times in the 16 years I've been here, and probably the years before that.

Vandalism is a word I hate for all of Superintendents do. We have all had the sickening feeling in our stomachs as we check the property upon arrival in the early hours of the day. It is a funny thing, but so frequently, as I cross the railroad tracks from the shop to the golf course, I somehow know something is wrong or something has happened even before I actually lay my eyes on any damage. Call it clairvoyance or some sixth sense, but it is an eerie feeling. Nearly always my deep down gut reaction is confirmed. That sickening feeling turns to extreme anger, rage and frustration as I scout these 100 acres and assess just how much damage will have to be repaired before we get on with the real work of the day. The wasted time spent fixing that damage, the replacement of stolen items and the fact that playing surfaces will require time to heal all lead to a hatred of the mentality that causes some in our society to derive joy from such perverse and destructive activities.

I should be hardened to all of the misery vandalism can bring. I've seen it all my life. Farms and farmers suffer from vandalism almost as much as do golf courses and Golf Course Superintendents. On our farm we always allowed "city folks" to pick blackberries, to harvest butternuts, hickory nuts and walnuts, even if they didn't ask. We didn't bother those peo-

ple searching for morrel mushrooms in the early spring, nor did we post our land to keep out small game and deer hunters. By and large people respected what was ours and appreciated my dad's trust. But then there were those in the small minority who had to spoil it for everyone else. These were the hunters who parked their locked cars in front of field and pasture gates that we needed to use. There were those who ignored hunting seasons and those who chose to pick certain wildflowers in spite of the fact it was illegal. Cut fence lines, on occasional dead cow that had been killed because she moved (cattle really don't look like deer), and holes shot in signs and buildings by "armed vandals", not real hunters. For farm property on relatively deserted roads there was always an open season on dumping — sofas, refrigerators and beer cans. And it has gotten worse for them as it has for us. Farmers are increasingly plagued with a swelling stream of trespassers, pilferers and vandals. The popularity of 4-wheel drive vehicles and the even more invincible ATV's (all terrain vehicles) and a need by the owners of them for a place to drive has led to acres and acres of destroyed crops and damaged property. They are as fed up with it as we are. In rural areas, it is the honest hunters and innocent harvesters of wild crops that suffer. Many farmers, if not most, now post their land to "no hunting" and "no trespassing". Unfortunately, that has not solved the problem.

I'm convinced we have suffered every conceivable kind of vandalism on our golf course, and some that you could not imagine. Yet every year it gets worse and the "Wreckreationers" get more creative and more bold. We go through about 100 flags and poles every year. Two years ago, in mid-afternoon on a Sunday, some fool drove right on the golf course and across the 15th green! We caught him, obviously, because it was a licensed 4-wheel drive vehicle and there were four players on the green when he did

it. And when Tom Parent was my assistant, shortly after dark one evening a couple of years ago, he caught five high school age kids dressed in camouflage clothes and ski masks all set to create havoc on our golf course. I've always enjoyed having the opportunity to work on a golf course in the middle of the city, but the price paid in terms of vandalism is very high.

More and more I resent what these young hoodlums have done to my attitude. I'm now suspicious of everybody out there without a golf club, and even some that are carrying one. A couple out for a romantic walk isn't welcome. Friendly joggers are usually asked to leave, sometimes not very politely. In fact, a number of years ago I chewed out a young man for running on our golf course in the early morning.

It wasn't until one of my employees asked me if I knew who it was that I had just given the boot that I realized I'd been leaning on Eric Heiden. The following winter he won about seven Gold Medals for the U.S. Olympic Team. Eric's family lives only a few houses from our Club and not two weeks after I'd given him the chase I let loose, unknowingly, on his sister Beth, another Olympic medal winner.

Sometimes I sound too much like the veteran of the U.S. Army Military Police Corps that I am — "Hang 'em with a short rope", says me more often than I should. Vandals have brought out the very base, worst instincts in my being. I preach to employees to "never get into a fight if you catch a vandal," yet all too often I'm convinced that the answer or solution to vandalism is that very street justice I'm verbally against. The fact of the matter is that if you catch one of these kids and try to inflict your own brand of punishment, you only exacerbate the problem and will probably be the one in jail instead of the ruffian.

There is no argument that the problem of property damage is getting worse. At our Club it had to have peaked when our new shop was burgled twice in 1986. The first break-in was through a heavily barred window. The

second time the thieves and vandals came through skylights in our 20 foot high roof! Fortunately, they were apprehended, but only after the damage had been done. And get this: the robbery crew consisted of a 14-year-old ring leader and two 12-year-old henchmen! Indeed, the feeling this kind of violation creates is best described by "assault".

The nagging question, always, is "why"? Why do some find joy in destroying what others own and treasure? Part of the answer may lie in kids with too much time on their hands and nothing productive to do with that time. I place a lot of the blame at the feet of parents; parents who should know where their children are at 3:00 a.m.; parents who seem unable or unwilling to hold their offspring accountable. Maybe increased vandalism is merely among the many manifestations of our permissive society, the result of permissive parents, overworked law enforcement officers and overly lenient judges. Many times the police who have answered our calls have told me that apprehended vandals are out of jail long before they have even started the required paperwork and reports. Maybe the slow demise of the family unit in our country deserves part of the blame — kids living in broken homes or homes with a new dad or mom who really doesn't care.

And if the question of "why" looms large, then the question of "what to do" looms even larger for Golf Course Superintendents. We have tried many options at our Club. We have been easy and understanding and not pressed charges against minors — that doesn't work. We have been tough — insisting on a trip through the juvenile justice system. That doesn't help much, either. We have demanded and received restitution — that offers some sense of satisfaction and pays part of the cost of the damage. We caught two groups cutting down large evergreens for Christmas trees a couple of years ago and were reimbursed nearly \$3,000. That didn't hurt the criminals one bit — wealthy parents paid the tab and one kid drove away from the clubhouse in his Mercedes. And we lost more evergreens the next Christmas, despite front page coverage in the newspapers about the previous groups. It happened again in 1986; "Christmas" trees cost the thieves \$2,400 along with some action by the District Attorney.

We have gone the "rent-a-cop" route. Forget this option. Unless you are on the property to supervise them, you will get no results. Most are losers who couldn't find horse manure in a stable, let alone a 15-year-old vandal

in the middle of the night. Two years' subscription to this service net not a single apprehension.

The cold hard reality of the matter is that there are no easy answers or pat solutions. I guess we are doomed to suffer continued assault until things change in our society and its institutions. Call me a Pollyanna if you want, but usually I think it is better to let the flow of the river of events find its own channel, rather than forcing it along the way we think it should go. "Roll with the punches", I say. However, when it comes to vandalism, I think like William Henley wrote in "Invictus":

*In the fell clutch of circumstance,
I have not winced nor cried aloud;
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

We cannot reduce vandalism with a cowboy mentality of frontier justice, as much as I (and others) are tempted. It seems we are best off to press our frustration through channels of justice with determination and consistency. But we must not give in nor give up.

As with so many other things in this business of ours, vandalism seems to go with the territory. Small wonder the kindly and friendly Golf Course Superintendent does not always wave to every friendly soul on his golf course. His suspicion is too great. He has been assaulted too many times.

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