



THE SPIRIT OAK

By Monroe S. Miller

It was 15 years ago when the old burr oak that guarded the fourth hole died. All of the golf holes at our club were named when the golf course was built nearly 70 years ago. The fourth was called "The Spirit Oak" after the beautiful old oak tree that stared at players as they teed up.

Vincent and I were working in the southwest corner of the course on that day — June 10, 1974. It was a very cool and overcast day, well below normal in temperatures. The wind was calm. We went in for lunch at noon and when we returned to our work, we were startled by the sight. The old Spirit Oak had fallen over, tipped down to the ground to the south.

The sight of this enormous ancient old tree on its side was awesome, albeit depressing. The root system, which had anchored the tree in a dark silt loam soil for so long, simply gave out. It was broken cleanly at ground level; a woodsman could hardly have cut it more neatly. Although we kept the tree trimmed and removed any dead wood in the crown, there were some signs of decay in the trunk section. What obviously was less evident was the advanced decay and decline of the root system. We estimated the weight of the green wood at around 15 tons, enough to require a healthy and formidable root system.

The members of our club were as saddened as Vince and I were. I guess all of us just expected this old tree to live forever. After all, it had been part of the landscape for generations.

Of course, after the initial shock of its loss had softened, speculation about the age of our beloved "Spirit Oak" was a favorite topic of discussion around our club. Vince and I had enough sense to carefully cut three full diameter sections from the trunk of the tree, each about six inches thick. Through the interest and kindness of our only surviving founding member, Mr. L.J. Markwardt, we took one of those sections to the USDA Forest Products Laboratory here in Madison on the west end of the UW campus. Mr.

Markwardt was a world renown expert on wood products and spent his career on the Forest Products Lab staff. The experts there counted the annual growth rings of the Spirit Oak for us, and made other measurements of the rugged old oak tree. The diameter breast high (DBH) was 46.5", giving it a circumference of 12'2". Its age — 227 years. The average rate of growth over its lifetime was 9.72 growth rings per inch. That's the same as saying our "Spirit Oak" grew one inch in radius and two inches in diameter each 9.72 years. By the way, we took the other two sections and soaked them in a preservative (polyethylene glycol). One was made into a table and is still in the clubhouse today.

The task of cutting up this tree was no small one. Like so many farmers his age, Vincent grew up and lived his early years with a heavy dependence on wood. It was heat for homes, lumber for buildings and was cut for sale. We started "working up" the tree from its top toward the trunk. Limbs and branches were removed first and gradually we got to the larger body wood. I was thinking, all this time, of how much history the old tree had lived through and of the innumerable storms it had survived.

When we'd gotten to the trunk and decided to remove and save entire cross-sections, I sensed how each cut of the saw bisected a chronicle of our past that was recorded in the wood. That history was brought out by the raker teeth of the saw, as sawdust and bits of wood. The saw cut its way through time so quickly.

Vince started the cut and it exposed events and times in my own life; just beneath the bark was 1973, the year I started at Blackhawk Country Club. 1969 came quickly — the year I entered the Army, went to Vietnam, and the year of the impossible dream of actually seeing Neil Armstrong walk on the moon. Right after that was the sad year of 1963 and John Kennedy's assassination, and 1960, the year my hero Arnold Palmer won the U.S. Open.

1958 was when Arnie won his first Masters Tournament.

The saw bit through time: 1946, the year of my birth, and 1945, the end of World War II. Then we were in 1930 when the WGCSA was formed. Soon it was 1926, the time when the GCSAA was begun. The blade bit into the ring of 1921, the year our club was founded and the golf course was built. In no time we were in 1917 and the first World War.

The saw was sharp and cut through the turn of the century. Even then our tree was 153 years old.

The heavy drone of our ancient Homelite saw told us how it was laboring heavily through time — 1894 and the founding of the USGA; 1889 and the start of the College of Agriculture at Wisconsin; 1888 and the beginning of golf in America; 1865 and the assassination of President Lincoln. 1862 was important for Lincoln's signing of the bill introduced by Senator Morrill that created the Land Grant Colleges and another bill that created the U.S. Department of Agriculture; 1861 and the start of the Civil War. In no time we passed through 1850 when the first class at the University of Wisconsin convened in old North Hall and down to 1848, the year of Wisconsin's statehood.

The kerf widened as we cut deeper and deeper. Our oak was ninety years old in 1837 when Madison was settled. Five years before that, in 1832, the

Continued on page 5

To Keep Your Course In Classic Condition, Use These High-Quality Products from NOR-AM

- **NITROFORM® SLOW-RELEASE NITROGEN**
Releases by slow bacterial action to provide consistent 38% nitrogen
- **TURCAM® W.P. INSECTICIDE**
Controls a wide range of turf and ornamental pests, especially white grubs
- **TURCAM® 2 1/2 G**
All the benefits of regular TURCAM® in convenient granular formulation
- **BANOL® TURF AND ORNAMENTAL FUNGICIDE**
Controls pythium and phytophthora
- **PROGRASS® HERBICIDE**
For the establishment of perennial ryegrass turf, or on established perennial ryegrass turf, Kentucky bluegrass or creeping bentgrass for control of *Poa annua* and broadleaf weeds
- **PROXOL® 80SP INSECTICIDE**
Controls white grubs, sod webworms, cutworms and armyworms in fine turf



NOR-AM
NORAM CHEMICAL COMPANY
3509 Siverside Road, P.O. Box 7495
Wilmington, DE 19803

THE FAIRWAY CLASSICS to keep your course in top condition

IMPORTANT: Please remember always to read and follow carefully all label directions when applying any chemical. Copyright © 1988 NOR-AM Chemical Company. All rights reserved.

Continued from page 3

Blackhawk War was fought. The saw cut down to 1821, the year Tom Morris was born in Scotland. We sliced 1814 when Francis Scott Key wrote "The Star Spangled Banner", and 1812 when we went to war with the British again.

Small pieces of wood from the turn of that century fell beneath the saw. I remember thinking how incredibly long ago that was. 1796 — Washington's famous farewell validictory to the American people. 1790 — the first census of our country. 1787 — the constitutional convention approves a document to send to the states for their approval. 1783 — the British recognize the impossibility of conquering the rebellious American colonies and sign a peace treaty with us. 1776 — the most famous year in American history because of our Declaration of Independence. Our Spirit Oak was only 28 years old on April 18, 1775 when Willie Diamond's drum summoned the men of Lexington to the village green after being warned

by Paul Revere of the British march from Boston. And I would guess that this venerable old tree was probably not much bigger around than my thumb when my grandad Lemuel Monroe was born in 1757.

Vincent and I rested when we reached dead center. It was 1747 when a small root pushed out from an acorn to begin life for a tiny seedling that was to become an old and beloved tree. It was the same year John Paul Jones was born in New England.

As we cut through the trunk that remained, we traced our history in the order that it had happened. Many of the same thoughts occurred again.

There are remains of the fallen trunk of the Spirit Oak still on the golf course. A pin oak was planted adjacent to our old tree, to carry on. For me, the falling of this tree was a reminder of the mortality of all living things, even those that are among the longest lived, like trees. And I was surely impressed by the outpouring of sentiment by our members.

Near Arlington, Vermont is a marker on a sign post. It commemorates the majestic State Seal Pine of Vermont, which fell victim to old age and high winds on May 9, 1978. The tree, which was visible from the home of Vermont Governor Thomas Chittenden, was used as a model by Ira Allen (Ethan's brother) in designing Vermont's official seal of government. It was a huge tree then, in 1778, when he made his design. As word spread that day in May in 1978 when this massive landmark had fallen, a steady line of traffic moved by to see it. The tree was made an official state historic site. It was extremely important to Vermonters.

And so it is with the Spirit Oak. The members of Blackhawk, with the leadership of L.J. Markwardt, placed a granite boulder near the trunk of the fallen tree. The boulder is faced with a bronze casting that tells of feelings these people, in this time, had for a single solitary tree. Hopefully it will remain there for centuries, just like the old oak tree it gives tribute.



MOWER CONCEPTS, INC.

**Introduces The Fairway Frame T
Converts A Toro Greensmower
To A 5-Unit Fairway Mower**

- * INEXPENSIVE
- * LIGHTWEIGHT
- * DURABLE

ALSO OFFERING:

- * Rebuilt Greensmowers
- * Reel Spin Grinding
- * Full Service Shop

**Call For More Information
715-754-2636**



**the
bruce
company** OF WISCONSIN, INC.

(608) 836-7041

LEE BRUCE
GOLF COURSE CONSTRUCTION

2830 W. BELTLINE HWY. • P.O. BOX 330
MIDDLETON, WI 53562