



ADDING TO THE CONFUSION

By Monroe S. Miller

I finally took the step. After months of finding 50 dozen reasons not to, I finally called Dennis Thorp — computer whiz extraordinary — and asked him to come to town for a couple of days to try to teach me how to operate our new computer. The cold and dark days of January seemed conducive to this long dreaded activity.

It is no wonder I'm so reticent when the word "computer" comes up in conversation. I don't like hi-tech things. I prefer antiques, quite frankly. My collections are of "old" radios and "old time" radio programs; I like "old" toy tractors and "used" books. I like visiting cemeteries and museums and even twenty years ago I didn't like "Star Trek". You can guess what "Star Wars" does for me.

I cannot program our VCR at home and barely know how to work the radio in either of our cars (the radios with buttons and dials so small they must have been made for third graders!). I couldn't get daughter Holly's stereo system turned on if my life depended on it. I don't have a clue how to use call waiting nor do I own one of those cards that lets you get cash from a shopping mall outhouse late on a Sunday afternoon. Too complicated. Too hi-tech.

Ask me if I'm computer literate and I'd have to say no, even after two days of Dennis' help. The language is too buzz wordy for me — VCR, VHS, DOS, EZ, and ABC; menus and discs, both floppy and hard. Wordstar. 123 Lotus. These numbers and words and phrases that have such a gosh, gee-willy impact on so many in our society leave me cold.

Maybe out in the cold, too. That's what has me worried. That's why Dennis came up for a couple of days. Although I'm primarily concerned about being able to water my golf course efficiently with our new IBM PS/2 Model 30 computer and its Toro Network 8000 program. I made the concession to myself to learn more about it. This seemed the perfect time and ideal reason to join the computer revolution.

For several years I've been hearing how computers can simplify the job of managing a golf course. What normal and sane golf course superintendent can be against that? So despite procrastination and my reputation as a low-tech curmudgeon, I was sort of anxious to see what Dennis could teach me.

Once I made the decision to invite Dennis to my office, I felt much like most people feel right before they go to the dentist — you know, wishing it was over before it even began.

I've searched my emotions in an attempt to draw some analogy that would best describe how I felt after two days of instruction. Imagine for a moment that it is right before the annual meeting at the Club. You don't have an office — pretend your new shop is under construction. You have a big report to prepare for the Club; it's a major assignment and they're anxious to receive it from you. You have a mountain of materials and one of your Club officers gives you permission to use space in his huge, new, multi-storied office building downtown.

Just as you arrive at the building the maintenance engineer, who has been expecting you, is leaving. He's headed out of town for a few days of vacation. He flips you a ring of keys, tells you to make yourself at home and to lock up when you leave.

The first problem you have is finding the right keys to open the succession of doors you have to go through to get into an office with a desk, some light, paper and writing utensils. Your first stop yields a desk but you cannot find the light switch. The next room also has a desk and you're able to find the light switch. But you cannot locate a thermostat to turn the heat up.

No matter. There wasn't any writing paper there anyway. The search for a warm, well-lit room with pencils and paper, a desk and chair continues, to no avail. Finally, you gather up your resources, find your way to the front door and leave in disgust.

You head for the Country Kitchen, borrow a tablet from the manager and a Bic pen from a waitress, collapse in a booth and write your report. It's done in seemingly no time.

Welcome to the computer revolution. That's about how I felt on my first solo at a computer.

It certainly wasn't Dennis' fault. Fortunately, he is a patient man. His first day was filled with my normal ration of phone calls I couldn't avoid and people stopping with legitimate business. It wasn't the best atmosphere for concentration and learning. Frankly, I was kind of glad for the interruptions. I was smart enough to include Pat in the instruction and he was ordered to stay glued to his chair so he could show me anything I missed.

Like an idiot, I thought in two days I'd know all I needed to know to be an expert. Even with two days of work from a knowledgeable computer person who also happens to know our business, the most I **should** have expected was a brief introduction to the world and science of computers. That introduction has to include things like what components are for what and what gets plugged in where. You have to learn elementary items like how to get the menu (new word), how to ac-

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cess a program and then how to get back out (which gives new meaning to the word "escape").

It was reassuring to learn that there are tutorial programs to lend a hand, especially when you ask yourself what you're going to do when the instructor isn't around. Although there are books, the amount of time needed to find, for example, an answer to a Wordstar program problem in the 760-page manual could run days.

Somehow I thought if I'd invested two days in learning about computers and programs, I'd learn how to compute. What I did learn is that was pure fantasy.

My fear of the technology wasn't relieved, either. If anything, it may have been heightened. I even watched the "expert" erase something he didn't mean to. Fortunately he had made a copy. Imagine the damage I could do.

I did learn a lot about the capacity of these machines. I was amazed with the speed at which they work. I also found truth in the saying "they are only as smart as the operator". Without an operator, they are essentially worthless.

To the disappointment of some, I have to say I was underwhelmed by

what I see as a computer's helpful application to a golf course operation. That opinion may change as I learn more, but first impressions are usually pretty close to the mark.

There remains no doubt in my mind that the most valuable lesson learned is the obvious fact that a working knowledge of computers must be earned. That will take more than just two days. There are no miracles to be had here; there will be no substitute for careful and deliberate learning. I guess it's like almost anything else in our lives.

I intend to keep working away at the learning process. I do want to know how to use these machines, someday, even if I think their application is overrated.

And I'll concede there is a bit of truth in what Dennis said, as he wiped his brow at the end of the second day: "It is tough teaching an old dog new tricks!"

Editor's note: I put the above thoughts down on paper while I was in Anaheim at the GCSAA Conference last January. Not much has changed my thoughts since then, even though we do use that IBM computer to water the golf course. It remains primarily that — a

fancy time clock for our irrigation system. It is a fancy substitute for my manual typewriter, which I still use to do "The Grass Roots". It is no substitute for the reliable records I keep neatly stored in file folders. I don't have time nor do I see the need to transcribe them onto a soft disk. That is merely busy work.

I have found that the written instructions that come with the computer and the program are atrocious. They may as well be written in Greek. I am totally lost when something goes wrong. If Pat isn't around or Tom Emmerich is out of his office or the 800-TORO number is busy, I sit until one of them is available. That isn't a comforting feeling.

I also believe that with all the monkeying around, all the experimenting and all of the learning, these machines break even in time saving for a golf course. Sorry to disappoint you, but that is fact. Sometimes they just add to the confusion.

There is hope, though. I can definitely get along with the NETWORK. Bob Erdahl has one, too, and when he said he thought it was pretty simple to operate I decided I'd best spend more time with it.

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