



He'd Rather Talk Turf

By Lori Ward Bocher

Egon Herrmann, affectionately known as "Mr. Turf" to many in the industry, was supposed to be telling me his life story during an interview for this GRASS ROOTS Personality Profile. Instead, he was telling me how to overseed the bad sections of my lawn at home.

With his German accent, he carefully instructed me as to how to prepare the lawn, when to overseed, the proper grass mixture and application rate to use, when to fertilize and the proper N-P-K ratio for the fertilizer.

This, I soon discovered, is typical of Egon Herrmann, Executive Vice President of Kellogg, Inc., a Milwaukee-based seed and supply company. He'd rather talk about turf than himself. He'd rather use the interview time to campaign for the O.J. NOER Center for TURFGRASS RESEARCH at the University of Wisconsin-Madison than discuss his own accomplishments.

At 63 years of age, an enthusiastic Egon shows no signs of early retirement. "I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't like it," he says. "Otherwise, I would have been gone a long time ago. I don't want to retire. As long as I can, I'm going to be around."

A native of Germany, Egon was born in the northern city of Kiel in 1927. He remembers the pre-war period when his father was imprisoned for a while for being a Social Democrat. Still a boy when war broke out, he was old enough to serve in the German navy the last year of WWII. His only brother died in Africa.

"After the war, the opportunities in Germany were not great," Egon recalls. "We wanted to do something with our lives. I was too old to wait for things to bet better."

Before he could immigrate to the U.S., Egon needed to find a sponsor in this country. So he visited Milwaukee to meet with a friend of his father who had immigrated in 1923; the man agreed to sponsor him.

In 1953, Egon came to the U.S. as a 25-year-old single man. "I learned my



Egon Herrmann, Wisconsin's "Mr. Turf".

English by reading and writing," he remembers. A year later he was joined by his bride, Anita. For three years he worked for his sponsor, a masonry contractor in Milwaukee. "And I've been here ever since," Egon adds.

The next five years found Egon working in a Sears & Roebuck garden shop. "That wasn't my love," he recalls. "I get off the grass and I'm lost."

So in 1961 he bought himself a lot of grass — a 60-acre sod farm near New Berlin. Egon had been saving to buy his own business, and he claims it happened to be a sod farm by chance. "I was buying sod from this farm and saw it was for sale. I like to be outdoors, so I bought it."

He sold the farm in 1974 because he didn't have enough land to support the machinery he needed and because his children were not interested in taking over the business.

In the meantime, he began his career at Kellogg in 1972 as a sales representative. He later assumed some public relations responsibilities, and the combination kept him on the road a lot and took him to almost every major university in the country. "I'd rather be out among the people," Egon says. "I have a lot of friends all over."

The Loft Seed Co., which had owned Kellogg, sold the firm to general man-

ager Don Stein in 1980. Shortly thereafter, Egon was promoted to Executive Vice President.

With sales of \$13 million, Kellogg, Inc., is divided into three areas, according to Egon. Kellogg wholesales supplies to garden centers. It manufactures bird seed. And it wholesales grass seed — the division with which Egon is most involved. Grass seed is sold to sod farmers, golf courses, construction firms, highway departments and landscapers — mainly in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, Indiana and southern Michigan.

Egon especially enjoys working with golf course superintendents. "They're really good people," he says. "It's a professional group. Generally, they're better educated than the other people I sell to."

Although he never had any formal education in turf management, few know more about the subject than Egon, and people often call on him for his advice. "I listened to lots of sessions at universities," he explains. "You get exposed to that for a few years and something has to rub off.

"I am up on all the research," he adds. "You have to be. If you want to sell grass seed, you have to know the product." He also has an extensive library of technical journals devoted to turf management.

His love for and knowledge of anything that's related to turf prompted Egon to be a catalyst and one of the founding members of the Wisconsin Turfgrass Association in the early 1980's. He also served as vice president. Turf is important to Wisconsin's economy. As a crop, it ranks just behind alfalfa and corn.

"The primary goal of the Wisconsin Turfgrass Association always has been to build the O.J. NOER Center for TURFGRASS RESEARCH," Egon points out. The center now is being built adjacent to the new University of Wisconsin Golf Course.

As a supplier to the turf industry, Egon is involved in many other professional organizations. He currently is a director of the Wisconsin Landscape Federation and he previously was a director of the Wisconsin Sod Producers Association. He also is a member of the Illinois Sod Producers Association, The Wisconsin and Illinois Golf Course Superintendents Associations, the American Sod Producers Association, the Sports Turf Managers Association

and the Golf Course Builders Association.

Along with his work, family is the most important thing in Egon's life. He and Anita have four children: a daughter who teaches at Milwaukee Area Technical College; a son who is a CPA and senior manager for Price Waterhouse in Denver; a son who is vice president of the Orion Insurance Co. in Milwaukee; and a daughter who will graduate from college in December with a speech pathology and audiology major.

He also enjoys reminiscing about the eight trips he and Anita have taken to their native Germany. Although their parents are now deceased, they still enjoy making regular visits.

When the interview with Egon Herrmann came to an end, I realized that we had spent more time talking about my lawn, the NOER Center and Germany than we had about "Mr. Turf" himself. But I had thoroughly enjoyed my two hours with this friendly and enthusiastic supporter of the turf industry. I can easily see why he has so many friends.

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