



There's No Place Like Home

by Lori Ward Bocher

John Mortimer was sitting on top of the world back in 1952. But he decided to come home to Chilton, Wis., where he has lived nearly all of his life and has enjoyed a career with Horst Distributing, Inc.

Of course, "sitting on top of the world" doesn't seem so glamorous when you realize he literally was on top of the world at a small Air Force base in Nome, Alaska — on the Bearing Sea just across from Russia.

"It was cold. Cold and barren," John recalls, adding that he was glad to return to his native Chilton. But he also was glad for his 3-1/2 years in the Air Force, which took him to Texas as well as Alaska. "If I hadn't joined the service, I probably never would have gotten out of Calumet County until I started in business."

John was born in Chilton in 1931 and graduated from Chilton High School in 1949. That same year he joined the Air Force, trained in Texas and then was stationed at Nome. "It was right before the Korean War. But I didn't have to serve in Korea because I was overseas already," John explains.

When he was discharged in December of 1952, he returned to Chilton and went to work for Arthur Horst who owned what was then known as Horst Engineering and Equipment Sales. "I'd known the family, I grew up with Mr. Horst's son," John remembers. "His son opted not to follow in the business but to go to West Point instead. Mr. Horst knew me. I was looking for a job, and he was looking for help. So I was hired."

Arthur Horst, an engineer, founded the company in 1946. "He would design irrigation systems and things like that," John points out. The company also sold turf equipment and supplies. "When I first went to work, there was only Art, myself a mechanic and Mrs. Horst, who did the bookkeeping. Art went out on the road and I stayed on the inside and shipped parts, did whatever. Shortly after I was hired Mrs. Horst retired and I did simple



bookkeeping until the company started to grow and personnel were added.

"We started with the Ideal Mower Company and then with the old Worthington Mower Company, which was purchased later on by Jacobsen," John explains. "Then, in 1955, Jacobsen started a new program whereby we could go out and establish dealers. That allowed us to grow over the years."

When Art Horst retired in the mid 70's, they dropped the engineering portion of the business because there no longer was anyone who could provide that service.

In the 1980's, when Jacobsen was purchased by Textron, Jacobsen changed its distribution methods. "So we got out of the consumer end of the business but kept the Jacobsen commercial end," John says. "Then we took on the Snapper mower line to service our dealer network.

"Three years ago, because the consumer market is so vulnerable to the elements and the economy, we decided that we would discontinue the consumer line and concentrate 100 percent of our efforts on the turf market," he continues. "And that's what we do now. Since 1990, we've been predicated strictly on sales direct to the end user."

Today, Horst Distributing, Inc., serves 43 counties in northeastern Wisconsin and Upper Michigan. "Golf courses represent about 60 percent of our business," John points out. "The

rest is divided up by municipalities, cemeteries, landscapers, a few airports and sod growers—anybody who's the end user.

"Because a lot of our clients are in the north, we have more small golf courses than most distributors," he continues. "We don't have a lot of the big, prestigious courses. Our 43-county area has about 189 courses, and 35 of those are located in Upper Michigan."

Working with northern golf courses presents unique challenges. "They have awful short seasons, a three- or four-month season," John points out. "And, being as remote as they are, they don't require as many calls as some of our closer-in accounts do. They seem to be more self sustaining. They don't expect us to be there as often, although we still strive to contact them on a regular basis."

Jacobsen is the prime line for Horst Distributing, according to John. They also carry Cushman, Smithco, National Mower and Turfco equipment. Plus, they have a full complement of sundry items—Milorganite and Country Club fertilizers, Standard and Par Aide green and tee equipment, PBI Gordon and Grace/Sierra pesticides, Medalist America grass seed.

John has been president of Horst since 1974. "It was just natural evolution, I guess," he says. He's also the major stockholder of this employee-owned company. "Since Mr. Horst's death in 1991, we've had arrangements in gear to buy out his stock, which we're still doing now. All 12 employees are owners to some degree. And we have an ESOP (Employee Stock Option Plan) for profit sharing."

Unlike presidents of large corporations, John's job responsibilities are quite general. "I try to do most everything. I even empty the waste baskets," he admits. "Because we're small, we don't have an inside salesman per se, so I take all the incoming sales calls with the exception of the tee and green equipment orders which are handled by Donna Budnik, assistant sales manager.

"I'm in the office all the time," he continues. "I'm a very poor traveler. Don't like to travel, never did." Horst has three salesmen on the road to service accounts: Dennis Robinson, Ron Schumacher and Greg Kallenberg.

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The three salesmen also attend the meetings of all the associations to which Horst Distributing belongs, such as WGCSA, Wisconsin Turfgrass Association and Northern Great Lakes Golf Course Superintendents Association. "I've never been a director or anything with these groups, although I certainly respect those who are," John points out. "I try to maintain a low profile."

During the 40 years John has been in the turf equipment and supply business, he has seen lots of changes. For example, there's more competition now. "Years ago, you were either orange or red, Jacobsen or Toro," he points out. "Now with the new entries in the field, it's gotten to be quite a competitive market. In fact, most everything is sold on a competitive basis."

How does Horst set itself apart from the competition? "We strive to give service. We're dedicated to service," John answers. "In fact, on the bottom of all our stationary it says, 'Service is not our motto. It's our business.' Although we feel our products are superior, all other things being equal, service is all we have to sell."

"We maintain a full-time shop with four men. We service everything we sell," he continues. "As competitive as the market is, naturally you're bidding relatively close. We just hope that the end user will purchase from us because of our service."

John has also noticed a change in golf course superintendents. "Forty years ago, a lot of superintendents were the farmer from whom the land was purchased to develop the course," he points out. "Now many superintendents have grown up with golf as sons of former superintendents and are following in their fathers' footsteps."

"And their job is becoming quite a bit more complicated," he continues. "It requires a better educated superintendent, one who keeps abreast of new innovations in equipment and pesticides. Everything is becoming more regulated, especially with pesticides, and these people have to stay abreast of law changes. It requires a good, sharp person."

On the phone, John talks to every golf course superintendent in Horst's territory on a regular basis, and he's met about half of them in person. "It's a wonderful field for a young man," he believes. "But it requires a dedicated person because it is a lot of work."

John does not play golf himself. He gave that up 26 years ago when he was shot by another hunter and left with a shattered leg and a year-long recuperation. "I don't need to walk with canes or anything, but I did quit golfing," he points out. His son, however, was co-captain of his high school golf team and still enjoys playing.

John didn't give up hunting, though. "I do love to hunt," he says with enthusiasm. "Deer, pheasant, goose. I hunt most every

day after work from October through December. And every day in spring and summer I'm out there after work fishing. I own a cottage on Lake Winnebago."

John's wife, Donna, is assistant cashier at the local bank where she has worked for 45 years. The Mortimers have two children — a 29-year-old daughter who lives in Chilton and a 26-year-old son who lives in Sheboygan.

With his family close at hand, with easy access to hunting and fishing, with fondness for his home town, John is glad he left the "top

of the world" to spend a lifetime in Chilton. "I'd never want to move," he states.

He's also proud of his 40 years at Horst Distributing. Although he originally planned to retire at age 62 in 1993, his love of the business and its people will probably keep him around until age 65.

"We're just a small, tight-knit company and we're all service oriented. That's about all I can tell you. We strive to keep a good reputation in the field, which I think we enjoy. At least I hope so!" he concludes. ♣

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