



VINCENT

By Monroe S. Miller

We've had early morning coffee together thousands of times over the past twenty years, sorting out the recent news, exchanging thoughts about the weather and usually agreeing about the sad state of some part of American agriculture.

For half of those years, he was here nearly everyday day; the past decade—his "retirement" years—I've had to do without Vincent during the winter season. His return is one of the big reasons I look forward to opening day each spring.

The rugged, leathery, weather-worn face on the cover is known, I'd guess, to far more readers of this journal than its owner would believe. And there are some who have asked me about the man I have mentioned in passing in other stories in *THE GRASS ROOTS* over the years or talked about in conversations. So although he's not a celebrity, he is familiar to many in our business in Wisconsin.

Almost always when young people leave our employment after graduation from the University, they say to me, "when I get my own golf course I am going to hire someone just like Vincent Noltner."

Of course, they never do and never will be able to do that. There is only one of this guy and I'm making sure he doesn't leave my side.

We all have fellow workers who we enjoy enormously, who we learn from and who we trust. So it is with Vincent and me. From the time we first met and shook hands at the edge of the 15th green at Blackhawk in the fall of 1972, we have had a strong bond between us.

For me, the base of that bond and emotional tie has been respect. I have respected what he knows; his mind is like a steel trap, keeping in endless experiences for later reference.

It seems I have spent much of my life around highly educated people—ties to the University of Wisconsin and its great faculty, a club membership from a university town, and friends

who have traveled the same path of learning I have traveled are the main reasons. And yet, I've not met anyone any "smarter" than Vince, a man who only made it through mid-grades before having to return to the home farm to work.

Many times, for example, I've heard him carry on conversations in German; you wonder what his native tongue is because he has no accent in either German or English! Every once in a while he will slip and sign his name and use the very German **Vinct** spelling.

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Grant me a wish and I'd wish for a memory like his. He can tell you when they cut the first crop of hay in 1938 or what a particular cow brought at market in 1954. Ask him when ice left Lake Mendota two years ago and he'll probably know. Sadly, I cannot remember what I ate for supper last night!

The man has a keen sense of humor, telling real life stories that are funny. He enjoys playing practical jokes on those he works with. He laughs easily and often. His humor is of the country—rural Wisconsin—and is likely to be robust and earthy.

But make no mistake about this: his sense of humor never got in the way of his tough and no nonsense approach to work.

Vincent has the virtue of consistency; he sees life steadily and sees it whole and so many times puts isolated events—disasters to me—in perspective.

I believe people like him who have a calm and happy nature are those who feel the pressure of aging the least of all. He is still putting in a good day of work at 78 years.

He often makes me feel like a boring, mundane person. Every day we've worked together, I heard a story from the past that I'd never heard before.

Always, there is a lesson in it, although days might pass before that lesson dawns on me. I've relished all of these stories.

Robert Gard spent his career as a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where he directed programs and wrote profusely about the lore and legend of rural Wisconsin and her people. Professor Gard should have met Vincent Noltner. His stories would have filled one of Professor Gard's books.

When I started my career here, I was a young man and Vince was well into his middle years. Now that I have the perspective offered only by a middle-aged person, I fully realize how perfectly he has handled the potentially difficult situation involved in dealing with a younger boss. The lessons I've learned from him will suit me well as I reach the station when the same situation will undoubtedly face me.

That word "respect" comes up again. Despite my youth, Vince respected the position I held. He was patient and careful to understand my intentions; he helped enormously with the methods best suited to meet those intentions. What's more, I cannot recall even once when we have argued.

And although he respected my plans and decisions, he has never even once been condescending. Whenever he's told me something, I've always known that it was exactly what he thought. There are no hidden agendas with this man.

That, I've learned, is consistent with him. He knew the famous Wisconsin senator, Robert LaFollete, not as leader of the Progressive Party or as a U.S. Senator or as a presidential candidate, but rather as a dairyman. LaFollete owned a farm near Vincent, and he has told me that LaFollete wasn't much of a dairyman!

My two favorite Wisconsin authors are Hamlin Garland and August Derleth. Imagine my surprise when one time while we were working together he mentioned something about "Augie" Derleth.

To me, Derleth was one of the best writers I've read, a great Wisconsin

storyteller from Sauk City. To Vince, "Augie" was a mere acquaintance. He was always a gentleman and would often treat Vincent and his mother to ice cream when they saw him in the village. Vince did mention that he thought Augie wrote a column in the Sauk weekly paper. The rest didn't matter much and certainly didn't overwhelm him like it did me.

I've seen this retired farmer hold college professor and bank president, businessman and famous athlete in rapt attention while sharing a story, explaining a job or commenting about the golf course.

While he is holding court with such people or with the crew or with me, one thing you'd be sure to notice: he says more with fewer words than anyone you'll meet. He is a true practitioner of the "keep it short and simple" philosophy.

After twenty years at the same golf club, I have acquired quite a long roster of former employees. When they call or when they visit, ALWAYS it is "how's Vincent" or "can I take a Cushman out to see Vince?" When Jim Love stops by in the summertime, he never leaves until he has spent some

time to visit with Vince. They've done that for twenty years, too.

I have watched Vincent in conversation with gals who play on our golf course. They seek him out—for which we tease him unmercifully at times—and always there is a tip of his hat. An old-fashioned gentleman he is. It is truly refreshing to witness.

Never again can I hope to work with someone and share the commonality we do. That shared background of farm life will become more and more unlikely. We have mutual understanding of the value system of rural communities and have experienced the pleasure of close neighbors. We both revere the home scene and families. Religion is important to both of us.

For all those reasons, Vince is going to have to keep working until he is about a hundred years old.

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True, he is older. True, the smart golf course superintendent will make room for those proud and able people who just happen to be older and may-

be retired. Vince reminds me a lot of Francis Bacon's line from hundreds of years ago: "Age appears best in four things—old wood is the best to burn, old wine is the best to drink, old friends are the best to trust and old authors are the best to read."

To that I'd add a fifth that gets better with age—Vincent Noltner.

These words here have been about a valued friend, counselor and, in many ways, a surrogate parent. What a pleasure it has been to work with someone who is always helpful and never envious, who is enthusiastic and wise, who rarely complains and never gossips.

I'd guess there is a subconscious desire on my part that wants Vince to know how important he has been to me for all these years. I want to be certain he is aware of the value I place on friendship and how much I plan on continuing to learn from him for years to come.

And yet, somehow, I know that he already knows. Some things don't need to be spoken or written for him to figure out.

His wisdom probably told him years ago. 🍀

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