OLD READS

(With Some Advice Relevant Today)

By Monroe S. Miller

As Francis Bacon observed many years ago, "old books are among the best to read." I think he had something there, especially when applied to three prized possessions in my professional library.

I've tromped through used book stores from one end of the country to the other, and the time investment has yielded lots of volumes in my library, at work as well as at home, that have been long out of print and never reprinted. Two of the volumes I am going to tell you about are in that category.

The third was a gift from Bob Erdahl when he left Blackhawk Country Club to strike out on his own. Bob discovered it on a trip through Paul's Book Shop, a State Street landmark to tens of thousands of UW-Madison students.

The first book I am going to review for you may be the "classic" text in our business of golf turf management. It is, of course, "*Turf For Golf Courses*". It was written by Charles V. Piper and Russell A. Oakley. Both men were agronomists for the United States Department of Agriculture, and their book was published in March of 1917. As with many golf turf texts subsequent to this, it was published with support and assistance from the United States Golf Association.

The first line in the first chapter of this antique book shows how basics are true for all times. Witness: "Good grass turf is conditional by two great factors—climate and soil." Most of us by now have accepted we can't change the first, but here we are in 1993 with revised Green Section putting green specifications, still trying to modify the latter.

Any book reveals a lot about the period in which it was written. In the first quarter century words like bluegrass, bentgrass and crabgrass were hyphenated. Our common word "turfgrass" was offered as two distinct words.

Recommendations also reflect the early stages of our sciences. Piper and Oakley preferred "clayey loam to sandy loam" soils, while today most would prefer the reverse. The ideal putting green of that day was a loam texture, far from what we want in 1990s greens. The authors also recommended generous use of "barnyard manure" and thought courses in the north and west should sport "flocks of sheep to keep the grass short."

The subject of fertilizers was treated by the two USDA researchers. In 1917 they were still making references to Liebig's experiments with plants! They openly state that "the functions of fertilizers are not clearly known..." They supposed that some of them (fertilizers) "act as correctives or disinfectants ameliorating toxic conditions..." Interestingly, the scientists would not recommend "mixed" inorganic fertilizers.

In our times of renewed interest in composting, the extensive treatment of composts in chapter four is very interesting reading. And instructional.

Some subjects are timeless, as this book points out. Emphasis is placed on drainage, a lesson many are still trying to learn.

Seventy-five years ago creeping bentgrass was recognized as "unquestionably the finest commercial grass for putting greens in the North."

And they had this to say about annual bluegrass: "Annual Bluegrass is not always looked on with favor, but when abundant it makes excellent putting greens."

I can imagine that the greenkeepers of that day found this book invaluable. It has a chapter on how to distinguish various kinds of turf—an easy-to-use key to plant ID. Piper and Oakley covered the subject of turfgrass establishment—"making the turf" as they preferred to call it—and subsequent care.

Weeds were a bigger problem on putting greens then than they are today. In fact, the writers only worried about weeds on greens, making no reference to them anywhere else. Herbicides didn't exist, and they cautiously recommended ($(NH_3)_2SO_4$)) to kill plants like white clover.

Here's some interesting reading: "As is well known, all these weedy summer grasses are at once killed by a heavy frost. Attempts have been made to devise a satisfactory machine to kill them by freezing, but thus far the expense of the necessary portable refrigerating machine has been prohibitory."

Have we come a ways?!

Their discussion of turf machinery covered six pages and includes narratives about seeders, spiked rollers, sprinklers, rollers and mowers. That was it.

This entire book is worth whatever it did (or would today) cost simply because of chapters 24 and 25. Both are great—read chapter 24 and learn about experimental work on golf courses. The research of that time was not done at the big midwestern research universities like it is today. It was done individually, often on personal property, seldom by any faculty member and most often by golfers themselves. The story about the Olcott grass turf garden in Connecticut was fascinating. So were details of the Taylor method of putting green construction.

I most enjoyed reading the personal experiences and lessons learned by three ardent golfers in America at that time—Hugh Wilson of Merion (near Philadelphia), Walter Harben of Columbia Golf Club (near Washington, D.C.) and C.B. MacDonald of National Golf Links (on Long Island). Great stories and observations.

Photographs, detailed drawings and accurate sketches included in the book are excellent and really pull the narrative together.

This timeless (rolling greens isn't new, as you'd read in this book) and historical (what's a turve?) book is a treasure of mine. I take it from its place on the shelf from time to time and each time I do I greatly enjoy the trip backward in our history it takes me.

In 1922, O.M. Scott & Sons Company from Marysville, Ohio offered a book entitled *The Seeding and Care of Golf Courses*.

It is a slender volume that is smaller in dimensions that most books. But it is packed with the best advice of the day for golf course management. You'd love reading it.

The second paragraph of the first page refers the reader who needs more extensive information to Piper & Oakley's *Turf For Golf Courses*!

Material offered in this Scotts book is less formal than in the previously

reviewed book. It is written in a snappy style for popular reading.

Unlike the previous book, this one doesn't reference anyone in our position or anyone else charged with the responsibility of managing the golf course. The closest it comes is a comment here and there about green committee chairmen. This volume does advise that every golf club needs a "turf nut" in its membership, going on to say: "He belongs to the company of cheerful martyrs in an unappreciated but vital cause. The turf nut's helpful hobby is the velvety carpet of his much beloved greens."

The Scotts Company of 1922 did not recommend soil testing—"it is of little value" and suggested avoiding commercial seed mixtures!

Like Piper and Oakley, the writers of this book recognized the importance of drainage, advice that is solid today.

In the discussion of rolling greens, by 1922 some limitations had already crept into the recommendations. For example: "Rolling was formerly practiced with great enthusiasm and unrestraint, but it is now generally recognized that it can be overdone."

Back in the 1920s, as this book notes, "sanding" of greens was highly recommended and practiced because it served to "smooth the surface and lighten a heavy soil." Could have written that yesterday!

Earthworms were recognized as being very beneficial, but when the casts became serious on greens, the recommendation was to poison them with the "favored executioner"—corrosive sublimate of mercury.

This book gave advice on ridding the golf course of ants (Paris green), moles (traps) and brown patch (Bordeaux mix at half rate). The subject of weed control was introduced with "weeds are the Philistines of the golf course" and later a confession that "a weedless golf course" was nearly impossible was offered. Also true today.

In 1922 Scotts was a seed company and this book offered good advice on seed. At that time the bentgrasses offered were South German Mixed Bent (which grew wild in a small district of Germany) and Rhode Island Bent (a wild plant from New England that was less inclined toward creeping than the South Germans).

This delightful old read and the brief trip back in time it offers is illustrated with quaint sketches of the period—golf attire, cars, caddies and sticks with something other than flags on them. Bob Erdahl knew me well when he gave it to me, knowing the hours of pleasure over a lifetime it would provide.

The final book I want to tell you about represents a quantum leap in the science we now take so much for granted. It was the text in common use when I was an undergraduate (a long, long time ago!). I am referring to Professor Burt Musser's *Turf Management.*

Like Dr. Beard's book of today and Piper and Oakley's book of three quarters of a century ago, Musser's book was 1) the standard reference of its time, and 2) a publication of the United States Golf Association. It was first published in 1950 and revised in 1962. I have the 1962 volume. It runs 275 pages exclusive of some extensive tables in the appendix and an index.

Most reading this book would not find it as foreign as the Scotts book and the Piper and Oakley book. Since the phenoxy herbicides were developed in the mid-1940s and fungicides about then, the pest control sections are more extensive and useful. Interestingly, most of the fungicides recommended in 1962 have been or soon will be removed from the marketplace—Acti-Dione, PMA, Hg_2Cl_2/$HgCl_2$, Cadminate, et. al.

Irrigation is treated with some depth, although at that time systems were all manually operated. Space is used to discuss root zone mixes for greens, but no strong recommendations are given. The chapter dealing with turf maintenance is especially interesting to read. Discussions of poling, brushing, whipping, clipping and verticutting are offered. The thought crossed my mind that we maybe should rethink some of these procedures. Read Jim Latham's letter elsewhere in this issue of *THE GRASS ROOTS* for more thoughts on this particular subject.

I was shocked to read this on page 158: "Good quality creeping and velvet bent turf can be clipped to minimum heights of 1/8" without injury." There must have been some fast greens back then. I recall the lowest height in the mid-1960s around here on putting greens was 3/16".

Weed control, at this time, included chemicals. But Professor Musser emphasized cultural approaches, too. In particular, the picture of a "power mat" to be used for raising crabgrass stems so then could be cut before seeds formed was interesting. If you want to see how far we've come since the 1962 printing, compare your equipment inventory with the one given in this book. Unbelievable!

O.J. NOER was on the First Edition editorial board and you will know that from the many pictures he contributed, many likely from around here. Also on that board was Dr. Fred Grau, director of the Green Section in 1950. The revised edition editorial board included Al Radko, future Green Section director, and Bill Bengeyfield, Radko's successor to the Green Section directorship. Imagine—even Bill is now retired.

Turf Management is out of print now, but worth keeping an eye open for in the used bookstores.

These three volumes should have a home in the Wisconsin Golf House library. I hope I live long enough to see such a facility. I'd like to donate these and other volumes important in our golf turf history.

That is where they belong.