



This Texan Transplant Loves to Travel

by Lori Ward Bocher

You can take the man out of Texas, but can you take Texas out of the man? Not if your name is Jim Latham, director of the Great Lakes Region USGA Green Section. After 40 years away from his native Texas, his Texan accent still lingers; his energy and enthusiasm are as big as the state itself; and his language still is peppered with a few good-ol' Texan "hells".

"I've still got an awful lot of Texan in me," Jim admits. "I've been making the pilgrimage to Mecca annually or more. So I've not lost touch with my roots.

"But when you live in a place (Milwaukee) for 33 years you've got to let some of it grow on you. Sort of like moss," he jokes. "Hell, I'm even glad to see the University of Wisconsin football team do well. I've had so much fun ragging Wisconsin alumni about their losing games. When I went to Texas A&M we lost so many games I forgot what it looked like to win. I guess misery loves company."

It was that "other" Wisconsin football team that helped the Lathams bond to Wisconsin when they first moved here in 1960. "We came up here when the Packers were just coming into their own," Jim explains. "That makes a Wisconsinite out of you real fast. I still don't understand cheese heads, but I figure, to each his own. I guess it beats those hog noses."

If he hasn't been able to metamorphose to a cheese head during his 33 years in Wisconsin, it might be because he really wasn't in Wisconsin much of the time; he was on the road visiting golf courses. And even after nearly 40 years of business trips across the U.S., he still hasn't satisfied his Texas-sized thirst for travel—a thirst that has done much to shape his career.

Jim Latham was born in Hillsboro, Texas, a small town 60 miles south of Dallas. After graduating from high school in 1945 he attended a local junior college for one year; spent 20 months in the Marine Corps; returned to the junior college; and then trans-



ferred to Texas A&M where he received a BS in soils in 1951 and an MS in agronomy in 1954.

His first exposure to turf was while a student at Texas A&M. "A neighbor and I grew a little nursery of bermudagrass on a vacant lot owned by a professor of agronomy at A&M," he remembers. "We sold enough sod off that vacant lot to pay for my move to Georgia."

At Georgia, he was a turf specialist for the Coastal Plain Experiment Station in Tifton. In the summer of 1956 he also worked for the USGA. And he spent one semester as a graduate student at Rutgers University. "But I decided not to continue on the PhD route," he recalls. "I wasn't going to do research and I wasn't going to teach. So there wasn't any point in going any further."

In 1957 he went full time with the USGA as an agronomist in the Southeastern Region Green Section. His office wasn't even in the region—it was in Maryland where he could rub elbows with the more experienced Mid-Atlantic Region agronomist. "I drove across the District of Columbia and Virginia to go to work because my region didn't start until North Carolina," he points out. "It was a hell of a com-

mute. And I worked seven states, from North Carolina to Miami to Memphis."

But that seven-state region wasn't enough for Jim. In 1960, he accepted a job as an agronomist with the Milorganite Division of the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District (MMSD). "It let me travel throughout North America, not just in seven states," he explains. "And it gave me a more varied exposure to turf, a better foundation, a broader perspective."

Jim was hired at the time O.J. Noer retired and Charlie Wilson moved into Noer's position. But Jim did work with Noer on a limited basis. "He was a wonderful guy," Jim believes. "He and Charlie set up the fellowship for me to go to Rutgers. So when I decided to drop that fellowship, I told Lois, 'Well, the last place you'll ever live is Wisconsin.' But it just worked out that way."

At the MMSD, Jim started as an agronomist. Later he was promoted to chief field agronomist, "even though there was but one," he laughs. When Wilson retired, he became marketing manager.

During his 25 years with the MMSD, about 70 percent of Jim's work was visiting golf course superintendents with the company's 75 distributors in North America. "I would go to their area and we would visit golf courses and talk agronomy, make recommendations," he recalls. "It was a back scratching thing. We're in town, they'd like to see someone from the plant. Customer service."

Jim never grew tired of the travel. "It was fun. Especially back in the days when trains were a good source of transportation," he points out. "We could leave here on Sunday afternoon or evening, have a nice dinner in Chicago, catch the late sleeper train and get into a number of cities in time to go to work on Monday morning."

In the 1980s, some changes at MMSD were frustrating to Jim. "Our Milorganite Division became an also-ran," he says. "So I told a couple of people at the USGA that if anything ever came up, give me a call." That happened in 1984 when Stan Zontek left the Great Lakes Region to return to his home state of Pennsylvania. In 1985 Jim took over as director, and the office was moved from Crystal Lake, Ill., to Milwaukee so that the Lathams could stay in their Milwaukee home.

The Great Lakes Region includes Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota, Iowa, the Dakotas and Montana. Montana a Great Lakes state? "Oh, there's Flathead Lake out there, the largest natural fresh water lake in the West," Jim jokes. "Just like the great lakes of the Dakotas, which is the dammed up Missouri River. And, of course, there's Spirit Lake, Iowa."

Of the 14,000 golf courses in the U.S., about 55 percent are members of the USGA. And about 20 percent of those subscribe to the Green Section service, according to Jim. "We visit golf courses and do an audit on their conditions as we see them. We assist in planning programs for improvement of the course. We make suggestions for their general operation. Our job is to make golf courses better, more playable, to try to get the biggest bang for the buck of their budget," he explains.

Once again, the job involves a lot of travel. "We do most of our traveling by car. It's less expensive. And we can do a milk run—go out as far as we can in a week and then fly home for the weekend. My car is a floating office. Sometimes it might not get back to Milwaukee for six weeks," Jim says.

"If you don't like to travel, this is the wrong job," he continues. "Travel is absolute. There's no way out of it. If you don't want to be gone five days a week, best not come."

Jim has always been intrigued by travel. "I enjoy seeing things that I haven't seen before," he points out. "I'm

a sight seer, not a tourist. I like to look at things, be there, visit with people. I get bored doing the same thing in an office or some other place. This gives me an opportunity to meet new people or visit old friends. Then we have some common ground when I see them at a meeting.

"My favorite part of this job is getting to golf courses and doing a one-on-one with golf course superintendents and the green committee chairman," he continues. "We talk about growing grass on their particular golf course. Every course is a little different. It keeps me sharp."

His least favorite aspect of the job is report writing. "We do that at night when we are tired," he points out. "Some people find report writing a breeze. But it's difficult for me. I just want to make sure that what goes in the report is absolutely accurate so that the superintendent and green committee chairman get the right information."

It helps to have his wife, Lois, as his secretary and office manager. "It makes it quite easy," Jim reports. "She does a lot of cleaning up on the reports because she knows the terminology and a lot of the people we work with. She does a lot of things that I don't have to instruct her on every time.

"Sometimes it's a little difficult for her because I can yell at her like I might not yell at anyone else," he admits. "But she can yell back at me. That's an even-Steven type thing."

When making golf course visits, Jim

always likes to see the green committee chairman as well as the superintendent. "It helps because, in our conversation, he will get some idea of the problems involved or the procedures they need to take or the benefits they're going to get," he says.

"I'm not saying that superintendents can't give clear and precise information," he continues. "But sometimes it helps to have a second opinion. To hear it from someone else is always a great help. We mostly back up the judgement of the superintendent. We don't get into too many arguments with the superintendent." Jim also finds that, in recent years, they're being used more and more as informal arbitrators. "We're seeing more cases where a municipality owns a golf course but doesn't want to run it. So they contract out the maintenance job," he explains. "We come in to make sure the contractor is fulfilling his part of the agreement and to make sure he's doing the work and not letting the golf course run down hill. We're also making sure that the municipality is not asking more than they agreed to in the contract."

While reflecting on his 40-year connection to golf courses, Jim points out that the business has gotten much tougher. "Years ago, the biggest difficulty in golf turf management was to keep the grass alive and green," he believes. "Now there are so many special conditions people want—faster

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greens, closer-mown fairways—that it's not as much fun as it used to be. I've heard several people say that keeping the grass alive is the easiest part of the job now.

"Now so many other things have been inserted into the business—pesticide restrictions, government requirements for record keeping, training, OSHA safety issues, DNR invasion of properties, everybody being subject to a lawsuit," he continues. "Golf course superintendents today are under a great deal more strain than they used to be. But they're also much more knowledgeable today. We're growing better grass than ever. But it has become a great deal more tedious and stressful on the people involved."

After having worked with golf course superintendents all over the country, Jim believes that those in Wisconsin can stand up with the best. "The superintendents here are very well skilled. They ask other people for information. They're not clannish as they are in many areas. By and large, there's as good a group of superintendents in Wisconsin as there is in the world."

The same goes for the golf courses in the state. "I don't think anyone could complain about the quality of golf courses here compared to any other area in the country," Jim says. "That goes for the courses farther north, too, because you don't go up there for the same experience. You're looking for a more rustic experience."

The golf course superintendents think quite a bit of Jim, too. In 1990 the WGCSA presented him with its Distinguished Service Award. He also received a similar award from the Noer Foundation.

Jim used to play golf quite a bit but hasn't in recent years. "I've got too many other things I need to do on Saturdays," he points out. "I do a lot of paper work, play catch up, on the weekend. During the summer months I keep about the same schedule as those golf course superintendents—seven days a week and as long as it takes to get the job done."

When he has spare time he likes to read. "And I like to travel," he says. "Personal travel as well as business travel. And in both cases I end up looking at golf courses." He and Lois recently traveled to the British Isles and to Australia. "I can never get enough travel."

Now that he's 65 years old, Jim is thinking about retirement but has no

concrete plans as of yet. "It's just nice to know that now I can retire when I want to," he points out. "I like to work."

But I do get a little tired sometimes. But everyone goes through that with every job."

When they do retire, you can bet the Lathams will do some more travel-

ing. Maybe some more time to visit their two daughters, two sons-in-law and four grandchildren. And they may even end up back in their native Texas. "We bought a piece of property down there that we may build on some day. Of course, it's on a golf course," he concludes. ♣

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