



Don't Look Back

By Monroe S. Miller

The north wind roared down the hillside and the road to the Maple Leaf Country Club shop, whipping newly fallen snow around the corner of the building and sweeping it into a long drift right by the front door.

I parked my truck as close as I could, but hesitated before getting out.

I knew Tom Morris was already at work. The lot had been plowed, despite the growing doorway drift. Taking care of the snow was something too many of us had to deal with and didn't particularly care for. Winter was bad enough; early morning snow plowing made it worse.

It was still dark outside. The winter solstice wasn't far enough behind us to effect noticeably longer days just yet.

The shop windows were spilling yellow paths of bright light onto the drifting snow. I looked out across the golf course and could see the lights from neighbors' homes and even the clubhouse twinkling in the white world, not unlike the stars on a clear night.

I gathered my courage, zipped my coat up tight, pulled my hat down, opened the truck door and made a mad dash for Tom's shop.

Going from the cold and snow into a warm and humid shop of course fogged my glasses. Before I had them wiped clean a voice from behind the partially closed office door said, "the coffee's fresh. Help yourself."

It was the familiar voice of Tom Morris. As usual, he was the first one in the shop in this morning, had already cleaned the lot and was working behind his desk.

We had two missions on this blustery winter day. We were headed to a retirement luncheon for Ben Baxter. Ben was retiring after a long career as a golf course superintendent around Wisconsin, most recently at Glacier Valley Country Club.

On the way there we were stopping at an implement dealer in Bennington to look at a used utility tractor we had gotten a lead on. The faculty at the Noer Research Facility needed one, and since we've run tractors for all our lives we were asked to keep an eye open for a good used one.

When it comes to shopping for tractors, one needn't ask either of us more than once. It would be more fun than work.

I finished my cup of coffee while Tom wrapped up his office work. We looked out the shop window and Tom said he'd drive since he had a four-wheel drive truck. It looked like we might need it.

He was really prepared for winter travel. His truck was not only four-wheel drive, but he had split rims and huge, heavy treaded tires. I dreaded the inevitable noisy ride. He also had a winch mounted on the truck's massive front bumper. We were ready for any travel conditions. Or at least Tom was.

We ran out, piled into his Ford and swung out the shop driveway. The snow was swirling and blowing and drifting. It was kind of scary, making me very glad Tom was driving.

It had been, so far, a typical Wisconsin winter. The weather variously gave us bone chilling cold, sleet, freezing rain and drifting snow. The weather so far this winter had been so ugly

that we were actually glad to see the snow, but would have preferred not having the wind.

The weather was bad enough by itself, but it complicates life dramatically with slippery and hazardous roads.

And then there was the worry about winter survival of grasses. Often what should be a calm time for Wisconsin golf course superintendents wasn't.

"Why do we suffer through all of this, Tom?" I asked sincerely.

"Beats the hell out of me," came the curt reply. A moment of contemplation led to an expanded answer. "Maybe we put up with winter because it feels so good when its finally over and springtime arrives."

By the looks of this day, spring was a long way off.

The highway crews had done a pretty decent job of clearing the roads, and we were clipping the miles off at a good pace.

"I don't think it's snowing much anymore," Tom observed. "The wind is blowing the snow around, making it look worse than it really is. I hope the weather doesn't keep anybody from going to Bennie's party."

"Same here," I replied.

"Ben had an interesting career," Tom said. "Or at least it was varied."

"If you ask me, it was more of an up and down career, Tom. And I always hate to see a colleague on the down side."

Tom nodded agreement. We both knew what the other was thinking.

Bennie had managed a couple of the absolutely best and biggest private clubs in Wisconsin during his early and mid-career. He had received job offers from all over the country, so well know he was.

He had held every office in our state golf course association and state turfgrass foundation. He had entertained overtures from some to run for national office.

Ben was in demand as a speaker, had offers for consultant work and had someone asking his advice about something almost continually.

He was, simply put, on top. The circles of leadership in the Wisconsin golf community always included Ben Baxter. He was respected by just about everybody, but most of all by the players for whom he toiled at any given time.

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But then something happened. We weren't paying much attention, but it seemed to occur about the time he turned fifty.

He left what was easily the state's best job, in terms of salary and prestige and about any other yardstick you'd care to use. He wasn't fired, and there weren't a lot of wild rumors about any pending dismissal. Quietly and simply, he resigned.

Bennie was tight-lipped about the incident. Shortly after leaving he was hired by another good quality golf club, and put in a few decent years.

But it was at that club it seemed Ben had lost something. Just what it was, we didn't know. We couldn't put our fingers on it.

Before we knew it, he was gone from that club. This time, he wasn't given the opportunity to resign; he was simply let go. He, we had heard, was devastated.

Glacier Valley became his home, a course he worked at until now, his retirement time.

The last dozen or so years of his life, obviously, hadn't been pretty. I asked Tom if he had any theories on what had happened to the guy.

"Yeah, I have some ideas," Tom thoughtfully answered. "They aren't very original, to be honest with you, and I've seen what happened to Ben happen to other guys in our profession, too."

"Well..." I said, trying to nudge him on. Sometimes Tom was as Scotch with his conversation as he was with his money.

"Ben made a critical mistake. He worked hard to reach the absolute zenith in our business. He was focussed on goals for over 20 years, and he got what he wanted. And he deserved it.

"But once he got it, he sort of gave up. He figured he had it

made. It seemed he felt that the world 'owed him'. He went from a guy who was always trying to 'max out' to one who would rather play golf than work."

"Or work on his small farm or monkey around with one of his apartment buildings," I added. I confess I said it with some sarcasm.

Time was passing quickly. It was Tom who noticed that it had not only quit snowing and blowing, but that the sun was now shining and blue sky was evident.

We were riding along a ridge that overlooked the beautiful Wisconsin winter landscape. The newly fallen snow created a new world, fresh and white and clean. The small villages with church spires reaching skyward toward the heavens looked like scenes from Christmas cards.

We had the road to ourselves, making driving easy for Tom, and in a way, encouraging him to visit about our friend Ben.

I had a notion about men like Bennie that I wanted to try out on Tom, just to see if he felt the same way or had noticed the same thing.

"Tom, as I think back to the many times I've visited with Ben in the last decade or so, it seems like he always wanted to talk about the past. Today didn't matter and he had no real program for his course for tomorrow. He was, it seems, living on past laurels and seemed to think that was enough. He expected others to feel the same way."

Tom didn't say anything. He adjusted his sunglasses a little and kept looking straight ahead. Rather than worry if he disapproved, I kept talking.

"He lost the edge you have to have to compete. He became hesitant about everything, reluctant to adopt new prac-

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tices or equipment on his course. He insisted on using what had been working for him in years gone by. And all the while the rest of us not only caught up, we passed him by. At times it was painfully obvious to all that he was falling behind."

I was relieved when T.M. cleared his throat.

"Ben never recognized my philosophy—unspoken or not—of never looking back. It is probably an appropriate attitude in lots of other places, but it is absolutely paramount in a country club setting.

"A golf course superintendent cannot live in the past. You can't look back to the days of yesteryear, at least around any golfers. Few care what went on before, and you have to accept that. A green committee won't give a hoot or a holler about how little money you spent building new bunkers on the eleventh hole ten years ago, or how what a great job you did at the State Amateur just three years ago. Today matters. Tomorrow matters. Yesterday doesn't mean a damn thing. And I have also learned that most members don't even want to listen to you about the past on the golf course. They simply aren't interested.

"Ben, for whatever reasons, couldn't stop dreaming and talking about years previous. Maybe he thought he'd never grow old or something. Here it is—straight up—golf course superintendents who want continued prosperity must live on for the future. They must lead the club and the players into coming years. Reminiscing about past accomplishments can be fatal."

"It sounds like we are criticizing poor Ben," I said to Tom, feeling a little guilty. "But he did some things that you and I and others have to avoid if we don't want to end our careers like he did. And I know darn well HE didn't want to close out like he did."

"The truth is the truth," Tom responded with a shoulder shrug.

"It doesn't matter if you are a college professor or a computer consultant or a course superintendent, you have to be willing to change, to keep up, to make the most of what is available. You must recognize that progress is your friend.

"Ben simply did not do that. He resisted using new pre-emergent materials, didn't believe new disease controls were effective and wouldn't plant new grass varieties. He hung onto the heavy mowing equipment of another day. He wouldn't even recognize value in IPM.

"Our world of turf management is complicated. Survival, let alone success, demands adjustment.

"Let's be honest," Tom said, "it isn't always easy to change when you should. It takes effort. It's like the old Serenity Prayer 'God,...give me the courage to change the things which should be changed...'"

"Spoken like a good Lutheran, Tom."

I decided to share with Tom a line I'd learned as a result of our trip to New England last fall. We visited Edith Wharton's home, near Lennox, Massachusetts, and that visit inspired me to do more reading of her books—*The Age of Innocence*, *Ethan Fromme* and *A Backward Glance*. They were all written in the 1920s and 1930s, some while she lived there near Lennox.

It was in *A Backward Glance* that she gave advice that merited a commitment of it to memory: "...one can remain alive long past the usual date of disintegration if one is unafraid of change, insatiable in intellectual curiosity, interested in big things, and happy in small ways."

When I recited her advice, Tom nodded approval and smiled.

"You ought to put that in *THE GRASS ROOTS*," he advised.

I promised I'd think about it.

It seemed we were both somewhat relieved we'd had this visit. After all, we were at that age when it could happen to us.

The tractor we'd driven up to inspect wasn't exactly what they needed at the Noer Facility, but we bought it anyway. On halves. I knew Val would haul it home for us with his truck and fifth-wheel trailer.

"You don't very often see a Golden Jubilee Ford in that good a condition," I told Tom. "It will be a great restoration project for us."

"You'll probably be driving it in next summer's Good Neighbor Festival in Middleton," Tom said with a good belly laugh.

We slowed down as we pulled into Stockbridge, keeping an eye open for the Neptune Diner where Bennie's party was being held.

We found it—hard to miss with 37 pickup trucks in the parking lot. Not surprisingly, most of them were Fords.

Ben hollered at us as soon as we walked in. He was glad to see us, and we were happy for him.

Although the recent years past hadn't been the best for Ben, he was now retired with good health and sufficient resources. It could have been worse.

We hoped he would be happy for years to come, happier than he had been of late.

And although it was cruel to think it, I vowed not to make the mistake he had in his life.

Somehow, I knew Tom was thinking the same thing. ♣

