



## Hear Them Again For The First Time

By Lori Ward Bocher

It was his need for a little extra money that, quite by accident, launched him in the turf business. But it was Charlie Wilson's quest for scientific knowledge that guaranteed he'd be a player in the turf arena for the rest of his life.

Known to many, Charles G. Wilson was head agronomist and director of marketing for the Milorganite Division of the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District from 1960 to 1979. He spearheaded the O.J. Noer Research Foundation. He received the WGCSA Distinguished Service Award as well as awards from many other state associations and the USGA Green Section. He is credited with making "turfgrass" one word and with coining the term, "wet wilt."

And it was Charlie who originated the Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium. But he no longer attends. "I felt that when I retired I should get out of it rather than be a hanger on. Nobody wants to listen to the same old stories all the time. You're new," he tells me. "You have to listen!"

And I gladly share some of his stories with you. Hear them again for the first time.

The son of a food buyer for the Atlantic and Pacific Food Co., Charlie moved around a bit during his childhood. He was born in 1920 in Port Jervis, N.Y.—in the Catskill Mountains about 87 miles northwest of New York City. He also lived in Scranton, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C.

While in Washington, World War II broke out and Charlie enlisted in the Navy. He served 37 months in the Pacific during the war, and he served under a pretty famous skipper—Jack Kennedy—while still in the states.

"When the war ended, I decided to go to college and get a degree in agriculture of some sort," he recalls. "Even though I was a city boy, I was interested in agriculture. It just seemed to be a good choice."

Charlie enrolled at the University of Maryland where a few turn of events



Charlie Wilson with his first lunker, 1972, at the Mascaro home in Miami, Florida.

helped shape his entire future. "At the end of my first semester I figured I needed something to supplement my GI Bill," he explains. On the way home from playing golf one day, he noticed some nice homes in a Washington neighborhood, and he wondered if they might need someone to do yard work.

"So I pulled over, knocked on the first door, and I thought the woman was going to kidnap me!" he remembers. "They had gone all those war years without any help. She said, 'Let me call my friends, too.' So I got into the lawn business.

"And then I figured I'd better learn something about grass if I was going to be cutting lawns," Charlie adds. That led him to the USDA Plant Industry Station in nearby Beltsville, Md., where the USGA Green Section had its office.

Charlie found plenty of reading material on turfgrass culture, but he wasn't allowed to take any of it out of the building. So he made many trips to the station and spent hours poring over material. "I started reading some of the old USGA Green Section Jour-

nals. And they were fascinating!" he recalls.

His enthusiasm didn't go unnoticed. When Dr. Fred Grau, director of the Green Section, returned from a trip, he took interest in the young college student and offered Charlie a summer job at 87 cents an hour. "By then I had hired a couple of other college kids to help me out with my lawn care business, and I was paying them \$1 an hour," he remembers. "But I took the job because it sounded interesting."

The summer job led to a part-time job during the school year, and he worked there until he graduated with a B.S. in agronomy in 1950. "Then they offered me a job as an extension agronomist working full-time," he says. "I was happy to take that. I had gotten married in 1949, just shortly before I graduated."

After working in Maryland for a year, he was sent to California to conduct a survey to see if there was any interest in having a visiting turf service for USGA member clubs. When USGA decided to initiate the service, Charlie was chosen to open the office in Davis, Calif. "So I pioneered the USGA Green Section turfgrass advisory service," he points out. "I was the first director." From California, he covered all states east to Colorado.

After three years in this position, O.J. Noer tapped Charlie to be his understudy at the Milorganite Division of the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District. Charlie moved to Wisconsin in the summer of 1955.

"O.J. Noer was just a remarkable gentleman in more ways than one," Charlie recalls. "He was undoubtedly the world's foremost turfgrass agronomist. Just the honor of being able to work with him made me inclined to make the job switch."

Charlie worked with Noer for five years before Noer retired in 1960 and Charlie assumed his position as head agronomist and director of marketing. He spent much of his time traveling around the country to meet with Milorganite distributors, attend turfgrass conferences, give talks on turfgrass culture and care, and visit golf courses.

"I visited golf courses in every contiguous state of the union, most of the provinces of Canada, as well as many spots in Mexico and the Caribbean

*(Continued on page 13)*



(Continued from page 11)

Islands," Charlie points out. "It was quite a broad education."

What about his career gives him the most pride? "I'm proud that I was able to help the grass to grow," is his simple answer.

He's also proud of the O.J. Noer Research Foundation that he spearheaded. "Shortly before O.J.'s retirement, several Milorganite distributors got together at one of the national meetings and said, 'We've got to do something nice for O.J. Noer,'" Charlie explains. "So they came up with the idea of getting a fund together to send O.J. and Judy, his wife, on a trip around the world with a special stop in Norway.

"When O.J. got wind of that, he was mad," Charlie continues. "He said, 'Under no circumstances are Milorganite distributors going to do any such thing. It should be the other way around—I should be sending them on a nice vacation.' Amazing man."

Time for Plan B, which was formulated when Charlie and the Pittsburgh distributor got together one day. "We came up with the idea of forming a turfgrass research foundation. So that's how it all started," Charlie explains, adding that the O.J. Noer Research Foundation has been near and dear to his heart ever since. He served as its research director for many years and also was on the board of directors.

"The Foundation's first research project was conducted at the University of Wisconsin under Dr. Jim Love," Charlie recalls. "It's one of the greatest research projects ever done on turfgrass. It determined what mineral nutrient deficiencies look like on turfgrasses. No one had ever done that before.

"And we were able to help many experiment stations get started with what we call pump priming grants," he continues. "There was very little support for turf research at that time. Everything was agriculture. Turf was out in left field somewhere."

Charlie also is proud of his efforts to help educate golf course superintendents, especially through the Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium. It all started accidentally at a national conference in the 1960's when Milorganite was entertaining some Milwaukee-area superintendents. They had to wait for their tables, so they went to the adjoining bar. Not only Milwaukee superintendents, but superintendents from all over the U.S. were served drinks on the Milorganite tab. It mushroomed into quite a large bill. "On the way home I said to my boss, 'Ray, this is

crazy. Instead of doing something like this, why don't we do something that might be helpful in educating people on growing grass,'" he recalls. So Charlie, Jim Latham and Bob Welch came up with the idea of having a symposium with a one-subject format.

It began as a symposium for Milwaukee-area superintendents. But it was so popular that others wanted to attend. So Milorganite teamed up with the WGCSA and opened the program up to any interested persons. "We were always amazed at the far distances some people came in order to attend," Charlie points out. "We had one superintendent from Winnipeg, Canada who for two or three years running came down here by bus."

Increased education for superintendents is just one of the changes Charlie observed throughout his career. "In fact, I began my career at a time when the educational aspects of superintending were really starting to come into being," he explains. "Superintendents were called green keepers back then, and they were mainly farm oriented people."

While working for USGA on the west coast, he experienced a visit to one golf course where the green committee chairman asked that all reports be sent to him. When Charlie told him that the greenkeeper really should see them first, the chairman informed him that the greenkeeper could neither read nor write. "That was an exception, of course. But you see how much things have changed," Charlie adds.

"Turfgrass research was starting to spread out at that time, too," Charlie says of his early years on the job. Penn State, the University of Rhode Island and Rutgers University were the only colleges with substantial turf programs at the time. "I was in Los Angeles when the first country club out there fertilized fairways, if you can believe that in this day and age.

"Another big change in the turf world is the tremendous development of equipment to take care of the grass," he continues. "That really has been something. Industry has done a fantastic job of developing equipment and chemicals, too. Aside from the new turfgrasses, most developments in the turf industry have come from industry, not the university experiment stations."

This leads Charlie to a few of the negative aspects he sees in the turf industry. "I think the experiment stations have been forced into devoting too much time to proving or disproving proprietary products that come on the

market," he says. He also doesn't like the idea of universities relying on companies for research grants—and thereby dictating what type of research is done. "That may be progress to some, but not to Charles G. Wilson," he emphasizes.

And he is leery about the increased dependence on the use of chemicals in turf management. "You sometimes think, after you've been around for a while, that the grass they're growing today is so artificially managed that it could be called artificial grass," he says. "Fortunately, we're seeing integrated pest management come on the scene with greater strength."

He would like to see more check plots on golf courses. "In the old days, when all we had was the conventional drop-type spreader, you could always tell when something worked or failed because there would be a miss. We always had our check plot," he recalls. "When I retired, I found that very few golf courses seemed to be willing to leave some check areas every time they sprayed so they could see exactly what they accomplished with the last spray. I would like to see more experimentation done on the individual golf course."

Charlie has tremendous respect for golf course superintendents. "It's a tough job. It really is," he believes. "I



SPRING GREEN  
WISCONSIN

PIERRE  
SO. DAKOTA

PHOENIX  
ARIZONA

#### GOLF COURSE

- FEASIBILITY
- DESIGN
- CONSTRUCTION
- MANAGEMENT

#### LAND PLANNING

- MASTER PLANNED COMMUNITIES
- RESORT PLANNING
- COMMERCIAL/INDUSTRIAL

P.O. BOX 608, 166 S. LEXINGTON  
SPRING GREEN, WI 53588  
(608) 588-7888; FAX (608) 588-7887



tell people that I was a grass talker because it was easier than being a grass grower."

When he retired in 1979, Charlie didn't stop working. He spent much of his time developing a product he had invented a few years earlier. It's called Aquashade, a blend of colorants that discourages aquatic weed growth, especially algae. Charlie came up with the idea while visiting a Milorganite distributor in Florida who had two small lakes on his property; one looked beautiful while the other wasn't nearly as colorful.

Turns out the distributor had been on a Miami golf course on which a movie was being filmed. The movie director didn't like the color of the pond, so he added blue dye to make it look prettier. Charlie's friend had used that same dye in one of his lakes, but not the other.

"Then it hit me," Charlie recalls. "He didn't have any aquatic weeds where he had used the colorant. Being a turf-grass agronomist, I figured something was happening there." He did some research and found that the colorant makes the weeds think the water is deeper than it really is; therefore, the weeds don't grow.

So Charlie developed a patented product and started the Aquashade business. His brother, and later his sister-in-law, ran the business for several years. "We recently sold that business," he says. "We're in the process of wrapping that up. Then I'll be completely free to do what I want to do."

Since retiring, Charlie also has engaged himself in some more typical retirement activities, like traveling and fishing. "We've traveled a lot in different areas," he says. "We were in Hawaii for the first time last year. So now we only have one more state to hit, and that's Alaska. We may do that next year.

"The more you travel, the more you realize there's nothing wrong with Wisconsin," he continues. "Being retired, when it snows you just sit inside and look out the window. The winters are no longer bad once you don't have to mush through them all the time."

Charlie and his wife, Marion, chose to retire in Wisconsin. "We've enjoyed Wisconsin very much," he says. "We have three wonderful children, two in California and one in Pewaukee. They're all doing swell. Wisconsin has been very good to the Wilsons, and I'm very proud of that."

When It Comes to Turf Management ...

NOBODY KNOWS  
LIKE YOUR  
WILBUR-ELLIS PRO



Your one-stop shop for all turf management needs. Ask about our complete line of chemicals, fertilizers and seed.

Wilbur-Ellis...dedicated to quality, customer service and environmental stewardship.

Contact Ed Witkowski at

(414) 534-3334 or the 800 number nearest you:

IL 800-747-7400

WI 800-728-1090



®.™ registered or applied for Wilbur-Ellis Company. ©1993 WECO

Charlie has had some health problems—arthritis, a hiatus hernia that's finally been cured after 35 years, and skin cancer. But he isn't complaining too much. "As a parting shot, I'd like to tell the superintendents to, goodness gracious sakes, wear their hats," he advises. "The wider the brim, the better. And use sunblock. That's better than turfgrass advice this day and age."

In April, Charlie and Marion moved to a retirement village in Milwaukee.

"We moved to Freedom Village so I won't have to cut the grass anymore. Just talk about it," he says.

The village has an indoor pool, "But not a putting green anywhere around," Charlie points out.

"You'd better do something about that," I tease. "When the other residents find out what you've done all your life, they'll want you to put one in." "I'll hire Wayne Otto," Charlie concludes. 🌿