



THE PAST PRESIDENTS' CLUB

By Monroe S. Miller

It started innocently enough. Wayne Ertl and I were each enjoying a cold Garten Brau after the July WGCSA meeting last year at the Pumpkin Hollow CC.

It had been a fun meeting. For some reason, a number of past presidents of the Wisconsin Golf Course Superintendents Association had chosen to travel to Pumpkin Hollow for comraderie, golf, dinner, a lecture and all the latest gossip. Many were retired and some were gone from the state except for the warm summer months.

The Wayner and I had a ball with them all day long. It was more fun than either of us had in quite a while.

"You know what we should do, Wayne," I asked rhetorically after dinner, "is get all the past presidents together at one time. We could plan and convene the first annual *Past Presidents' Club* meeting.

What I was doing was flapping my jaws together, with little serious thought to actually following through. Wayne felt differently.

"Great idea," he crowed with bubbly enthusiasm. All I could think of was 'how much work could I have gotten myself into?' A lot, as it turned out.

I spent days thinking about following through on such a get together. I wondered long about the purpose of a meeting like this one, whether anybody would be interested, and I even questioned my own intent. In the end, if for no other reason than history, it seemed worth a try. I knew one thing for sure—it would be a daunting task. I decided to try.

I couldn't name all of the survivors and needed help with that and addresses. Using the directory for a guide and the telephone for help, I slowly put together a roster and current addresses.

Sadly, only two WGCSA members who had presided before 1950 were living—Angus McCloud and John Calvin. They were both quite old and had retired out-of-state decades ago.

Angus was living near family in New York, and John had been enjoying the Florida warmth ever since his retirement from Wisconsin.

I learned why there were only two pre-1950 presidents alive. In those times only long-time members who were very senior in both age and service were ever considered for the presidency of our state chapter. It was a stark contrast to these days when so few over fifty even remain in the profession.

Tracking down the 20 living post-1950 past presidents was challenging. Half of them were easy because they were still active in the group one way or another. The rest weren't so fun. I called the course managers at each one's last place of employment for help. Sometimes they didn't know, but offered another lead. I talked to former assistants, club officials, and children (when I stumbled onto a good lead like that). It was nerve wracking. But when all was said and done, I had a list of names and current addresses and, in nearly every case, a telephone number.

I composed a letter of invitation, taking days to write and revise it so the finished product had the best possible chance of persuading 22 very independent past WGCSA presidents to come to the first meeting of the Past Presidents' Club. Since it was my idea, it seemed only right to have it at my club and golf course. The invitations were sent to:

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| 1. Angus McCloud | 1946 - 1947 |
| 2. John Calvin | 1949 - 1950 |
| 3. Les Tompkins | 1951 - 1952 |
| 4. Hal Berg | 1954 - 1955 |
| 5. Lars Finstad | 1956 - 1957 |
| 6. Otto Crandall | 1958 |
| 7. Duffy Mulrooney | 1959 - 1960 |
| 8. Del Donneley | 1961 - 1963
(deceased 1994) |
| 9. Pat O'Brien | 1964 - 1965 |
| 10. Ben Wright | 1966 - 1967 |
| 11. Oscar Bahl | 1968 - 1970 |
| 12. Buddy Meyer | 1971 - 1972 |
| 13. Pete Allen | 1973 |

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| 14. Ben Baxter | 1974 - 1975 |
| 15. Fred Nilson | 1976 - 1977 |
| 16. Nels Jacobsen | 1978 - 1979 |
| 17. Bob Wasserhaus | 1980 - 1981 |
| 18. Stubby Payne | 1982 - 1983 |
| 19. MSM | 1984 - 1985 |
| 20. Joe Stephen | 1986 - 1987 |
| 21. Tom Morris | 1988 - 1989 |
| 22. Frank Mueller | 1990 - 1991 |
| 23. Bogey Calhoun | 1992 - 1993 |

Five days after the invitations were mailed I received my first reply. At first I was surprised—no, delighted would be a better word. But as I thought about it, the word had gotten to many of the guys well before the invitations. Those I had talked to used phrases like "I wouldn't miss it for anything" when I asked if they would attend.

The only griping came from the current president who wanted to come. "Sorry," I replied, "you're not a past yet!" His complaining was very entertaining.

Within two weeks I had a reply from all of them. And they were all—every one—coming to the meeting! I couldn't believe it, probably because I hadn't anticipated nor dared dream of such a wonderful possibility.

The response made me wildly

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happy, but nervous too. Since I had volunteered to be the host, I obviously wanted the course, the meals and the meeting to be perfect for a group of guys I greatly respected and really liked. Preparations for that perfect day kept my spare time occupied weeks before the club meeting.

There were hotel reservations to make and travel arrangements—to and from our course, and to and from the airport and hotels, and everywhere between—to plan. The luncheon menu had to be worked out, the golf arrangements squared away and the evening banquet detailed. No doubt I was driving the clubhouse manager and golf pro crazy. For 22 people. Who are the waitresses working that night? Are they the best? Are there caddies available? Will you have carts free? Our weather consultant was tired of guessing the weather for that day for me. "Will they all really make it to Madison, or will some have a change of heart and mind? Will this be one of those fabled 'he held a party and no one came' situations?" That thought made my palms sweaty.

As it always does, the appointed day came, right on schedule. The weather was excellent—calm and sunny and cool, and not a soul had backed out. "The nervousness won't leave," I told myself, "until they all go home. Then I will be able to relax."

I must admit that the course conditions came together nicely. The outstanding weather helped a lot. There were no surprises of any sort. And since tee times didn't begin until after lunch, our staff had ample time for getting everything mowed, including a late, second cut on the greens. After all, my afternoon customers were pretty discriminating and very knowledgeable.

Cheryl went to the airport to pick up Pat O'Brien and Ben Wright. They had become such good friends while in Wisconsin that they retired to the same neighborhood in Arkansas. The easiest way for them to get here was by plane. We reserved rooms at the Inn Towner Hotel, not far from the course.

It has never been my style to spend much time around the clubhouse and I was a bit uncomfortable doing it today. Members were commenting on my presence—"imagine seeing your here" and "you look pretty good when you get dressed up" and "are you bucking for a job in the pro shop?" It reminded me what a great membership there was and how lucky I was to work for them.

"Just business in the big house," I'd reply.

As is usual with many golf course superintendents, my guests started arriving early, making me glad I had planned for it. I wondered how many of those 21 guests would arrive in pickup trucks. Two were flying in and I didn't count, although I had come to work in a truck! That left 19. Among them about a dozen were still working, leading me to think that they'd all arrive in our favorite transportation.

I was right. Of the remaining seven, a few had trucks. My jaw dropped, however, when Duffy Mulrooney drove into the club parking lot in a mint green Lincoln Towncar! He drove to a far corner of the lot and parked where there wasn't another vehicle within 10 spaces. I walked over to greet him, saying "I hope a bird doesn't get nervous over that tank!" He smiled as we shook hands. I'd heard Duffy had invested wisely his whole life and had retired making more money than he ever had while working.

Before we'd made it back to the clubhouse a car drove slowly by us—a jet black Thunderbird. The electric window came down, revealing a smiling Buddy Meyer with an unlit cigar in one corner of his mouth.

"Where are you parking the expensive cars?" he asked with a widening grin. He reached out for Duffy's handshake.

"Over by the green boat," I told him. "Hurry up—we will wait for you."

Nearly everyone was present by now. The guys were getting their gear squared away in the locker room, nosing around the clubhouse and the Lakeside Room where our buffet was set up.

The thought crept into my mind, despite attempts to resist, that so far this day was off to a perfect start. The conviviality among the past presidents was pretty hard to miss. So far, they were enjoying themselves.

Although they were hardly needed, the main business at lunch was introductions. We went around the tables and each in turn stood to share his present home and what he was doing—working, retired, whatever.

After nourishment and refreshment, Bogey Calhoun took the floor and laid out plans for the golf event. I was busy taking bets on the par threes—first on the fifth and then on the sixteenth. The group comprised seven threesomes.

Among these guys who had spent a lifetime, practically speaking, in golf, the least worry was slow play. They whizzed around the course in short order and headed for the locker room

to clean up. Frank Mueller won the big prize—low gross. But Bogey had a prize for everyone—short drive/long drive, short putts/long putts, most/least putts, farthest from home, most grand-kids, oldest/youngest, etc. It was a masterful job only Bogey could have done.

We gathered back in the Lakeside Room for cocktails and dinner. The pace of conversation was furious! It seemed all were enjoying themselves, which made me happy. The clubhouse manager came in to tell me to get everybody seated so he could begin serving the meal.

After we were at our places, old John Calvin tapped his soup spoon on his water glass, getting everyone's attention. The waitresses paused to see what he wanted. John, speaking slowly but with all absence of nervousness, asked us to bow our heads in prayer. He then gave thanks for the great weather, the feeling of brotherhood and the meal we were about to receive. He also asked Him for safe travel for all of us. John's prayer was unscripted but very appropriate and appreciated. I wished I had remember to provide for it.

It was a Wisconsin meal, all the way. Plates of Colby, Swiss, cheddar and brick cheese were washed down with cold Garten Brau before we were seated. Preceded by a green salad, dinner included a sizzling T-bone steak and a baked red potato. The vegetables included broccoli, carrots and cauliflower. The wait staff poured Wollersheim Prairie Red wine. The food wasn't fancy, but every plate was clean when dinner was over. Dessert was a generous piece of cranberry pudding bread.

Before I could stand and offer a few comments Angus McCloud was up and quickly getting everyone's attention. "I am going to read the names of our departed colleagues who have presided over the WGCSA. When I am done, let us give them a moment of silence."

I wondered to myself, again, how I could have forgotten to make arrangement for a necrology. It was appreciated and touching. Angus read slowly, giving the name and club and date of office for each of the departed of our past presidents.

Then it was Otto Crandall who stood with his wine glass in his right hand. He raised it and offered a toast: "Here's to three of the finest things in the world—the beautiful color of green grass, the pleasure of good friendship

and the unity provided us by the game of golf."

"Here! Here!" was the spontaneous cry from everybody.

Conversation was halted again when Lars Finstad slowly rose from his chair. He is a quiet man but the guys stopped talking when they realized he had something he wanted to say. He began deliberately.

"Helen and I have had a good life. We both were born and raised in Wisconsin, raised our kids here and retired in the state, too. We worked hard but were rewarded with some prosperity." He paused before he continued. I sensed he had something important to tell us and he was thinking about how to say it. He went on.

"We feel like we should share what we have been blessed with. We have thought about this for a long time, consulted with our kids and even the pastor of our church. So here is what we want to do to show our gratitude. We are going to give the University of Wisconsin-Madison Foundation \$200,000 for an endowment fund. In five years the growth should be significant enough that annual earnings can be harvested. We want those earnings to be used for golf turf research at the NOER Research Facility. That part of it is important to me since I knew O.J.

so well for so long. This way others can share in the good life we had in golf course management in our state." Then Lars sat down.

The presidents, especially me, were stunned. Lars hadn't let a word of it out to anyone, so it was a genuine surprise.

We were floored by the sentiment he showed, overwhelmed by the depth of the gratitude he and Helen felt. No one in our state had ever come close to such an expression.

It reminded me of the gift Tuck and Becky Tate made to the program at Michigan State a few years ago. Same kind of people, same feelings, same humble generosity and need to share.

We looked at one another, not quite knowing what to do. Bogey slowly stood up, clapping deliberately. Stubby Payne followed, and then Fred Nilson. Soon we were all on our feet, applauding like crazy and smiling big grins. Lars' face was red and he was looking down. He didn't quite know what to do. But I know he was pleased.

I thought to myself, "this is one of the finest moments in my life." The first ever *Past Presidents' Club* meeting was soon to be history and it was going to be a memory none of these

guys would forget.

Freud once said that there are only two things that make life worth living—love and work. It occurred to me that events this day prove that both are the center of a golf course superintendent's life. There is the love of golf courses and the game and of plants. There is the love of working to produce something that is beautiful and useful and a source of pleasure for so many. There is—dare a man say it?—a kind of affection for other people who love golf courses and labor at making them what they are. The past presidents reaffirmed what I've known my whole working life—these are neat people to know. There is a low level of meanness and a high level of generosity among our colleagues. Lars amplified that tonight.

I wanted this to last forever. I stepped back to one side of the Lakeside Room, watching my guests bid farewell to one another. Lars had a crowd around him as he accepted thanks and congratulations.

It was too late to try to get anybody's attention. I'd forgotten to ask if they thought we should do this again.

But somehow I knew what that answer would have been. Already I was trying to think about what we could do for an encore. ♣

WINTERTIME for the GROUNDS CREW

PERCEPTION:

REALITY:

