



## Collector of History, Memories, and Other “Stuff”

By Lori Ward Bocher

Because *The Grass Roots* doesn't have the budget to send me to Arkansas or Texas, or even to Madison or Milwaukee, where past Personality Profile subjects live, I usually do my interviews by telephone. But Bill Sell, president of the WGCSA in 1968 and 1969, lives less than 20 miles away from me. So I decided to do this interview in person. And I'm glad I did.

If I hadn't met him in person, I couldn't have browsed through his scrapbooks, or seen his logo golf ball collection, or taken a glimpse at his genealogy records, or visited his basement storage unit that is filled with personal mementoes.

It struck me that Bill Sell is an organizer and a collector of history, of memories, and of “stuff”.

“Tell me about your past,” I start the interview.

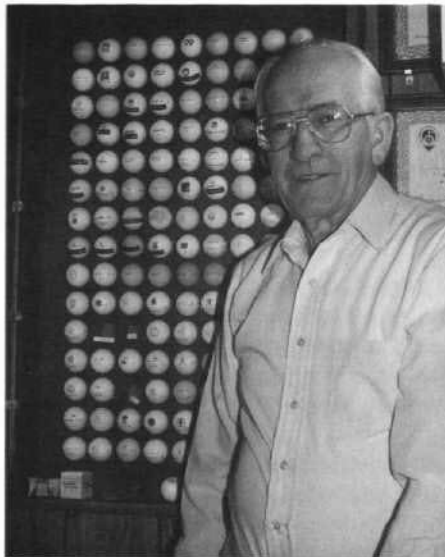
Bill was born “in the great state of Iowa,” as he puts it, on a farm near Sumner in the northeastern part of the state. His family left the farm when he was 2 years old, his father died when he was 6 years old, and his mother remarried when he was 10.

He moved to Milwaukee in 1942 and a few months later he joined the Army and saw combat duty in Europe during World War II as part of the 14th Armored Division, 94th Reconnaissance.

When he was discharged from the Army in 1946, Bill returned to Milwaukee; sadly, his mother died while he was in the service. In 1947, Bill married Lucille Hadler.

A semi-truck driver before the war, Bill returned to that job when he was discharged from the Army. “But I wanted a change of jobs,” Bill recalls. “I had an acquaintance who worked for the Milwaukee County Park Commission. That sounded interesting to me.” So in the summer of 1947 he accepted seasonal work at the Brown Deer Golf Club. And in 1948 he became a permanent employee there.

Russell Kurtz was course superin-



Only a few golf balls remain from Bill Sell's collection that once numbered over 12,000.

tendent at the time. “He really gave me an excellent on-the-job training program,” Bill says. “He was always there if someone had a question or wanted to know something.”

In 1952 Bill was promoted to superintendent of the Currie Park Golf Course which also was part of the Milwaukee County Park System. Then in 1959 he accepted a job as superintendent at the Port Washington Country Club where he helped build the second nine holes. He stayed there until 1968.

It's at Port Washington where, quite by accident, Bill started a logo golf ball collection that grew to more than 12,000 balls at one point. “When I started at Port Washington we had trouble with the water system,” Bill explains, adding that they had to drain a pond. “Among the balls at the bottom of the pond was a pink one that said ‘Cincinnati Tool and Grinding Co.’ I thought that was pretty unusual.”

So he started to collect golf balls. And soon he joined the Golf Collectors Society of America. Since many of his balls were found at the bottom of ponds, he was generous when trading balls and would think nothing of giving

away 20 balls for three that he really wanted. “I never traded ball for ball because other traders usually had to buy them,” he adds.

“I started collecting balls because of the uniqueness of that pink ball with an inscription on it,” Bill explains. “But I kept collecting them to see how many I could get in the end.” And in the end, he had more than 12,000 balls. He also collected tees with company names, ball markers and divot lifters.

When he retired, Bill sold most of the balls and gave away the other collectibles. But he kept about 40 balls from overseas, one from each state, and some of the novelty balls—including his original pink ball and a black “8” ball. He's still working on acquiring new foreign balls. “They're getting rather difficult to obtain because I already have balls from the major countries,” Bill explains.

“We'd better get back to your biography,” I interject.

After leaving Port Washington in 1968, Bill traveled north to Ridgeway Golf and Country Club in Neenah. “They were in the process of installing an irrigation system, so I was there to install it,” Bill recalls. Then a few years later in 1972 he was asked to oversee the construction of a new course, Chaska Golf Course, just west of Appleton. And that's where he stayed until his retirement in 1985. “The sudden change from working every day to not working at all—it was a real adjustment,” Bill admits.

After considering Eagle River, Florida and Arizona, the Sells decided to stay in Appleton when Bill retired. “We have one son and four grandchildren here,” Bill explains. “We get to enjoy them and see them mature into adults.” Their oldest granddaughter is a junior in college.

And it was that granddaughter who gave Bill his first major project after retirement. “Shortly before my retirement she asked me about her heritage, so I gave her a brief rundown,” Bill explains. “After I retired she asked

me again, so I wrote a brief, 68-page autobiography." He made copies for all the grandchildren.

"Then I started working on family roots. I worked quite steady at that for four years," he explains. He learned a little German so he could write letters in search of family records in Germany. He utilized the genealogy information compiled by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in Salt Lake City, Utah. And he took trips to Iowa, where his ancestors first settled in the U.S.

"After I finished the project, for the next six months I went nuts," Bill admits. "I didn't have anything to do." So he went to work part-time at an auto parts store. "That worked out real well because it broke up my week.

"But then one morning I woke up when it was snowing," he continues. "I said to myself, 'What in the hell am I doing this for? I don't have to work.' And so I gave my notice and quit a few weeks later."

Since retirement, Bill continues to golf and the Sells have taken several short trips. Bill's eyes light up when he tells me about a trip to a golf course in Danbury, Wis.—a small town along the St. Croix River and Minnesota border in Burnett County. "They have sand greens. That's why I wanted to play there," he explains.

"Sand greens?" I ask. "I've never heard of that."

"You haven't? They're made of a compacted, oil-based sand," he explains. "Lots of courses used to have them. Going there took me back to my childhood. It was like somebody pulled a shade, and it was the 1930s again. Everyone who plays golf should go there once to play on those sand greens. It would make them appreciate what we have now."

Bill remembers the sand greens. But he doesn't remember the name of the course. So he goes to the closet and pulls out a notebook that reveals still another collection—golf course score cards. "I have one from all but three of the established courses in Wisconsin," he points out. "I request them by mail, but I have played a lot of the courses, too."

His finger runs down the list of golf courses. "Yellow Lake Golf Course. That's the course with sand greens," he adds.

In retirement, Bill also likes to read a lot—autobiographies, early American history, Mark Twain, and golf magazines—including *The Grass Roots*. "It's

always the first thing I read when it comes," he admits. "Monroe is an excellent writer and editor. The awards from the national association prove his ability. Plus, he's a good friend."

And Bill continues to do something he started 32 years ago—attending the reunions of his Army division. Once a year there's a seven-state reunion in LaCrosse with about 120 people attending. The national reunion, which moves from state to state, attracts 600 to 800 each year. Not surprisingly, Bill has won the golf outing three times at the national reunion.

"The reunions are real nice," Bill says. "When you're in the service, those men are the best friends that you ever had in your life. It's nice to see them again. But we very rarely talk about the combat days."

"Why?" I ask.

"We want to forget about it. When I came home from Europe I prayed to God that I could forget it," Bill says as his eyes mist over.

And so we change the subject. "What do you miss about your job?" I ask.

"What I miss most isn't about the job but about the fellowship and camaraderie with other superintendents," Bill admits. "I don't miss the stress of the job, making decisions. I don't miss that a bit.

"There have been a lot of changes in golf course maintenance," Bill continues. "The results are much better than when I got into it in 1947. Maintenance has improved greatly. Equipment is better. There's more knowledge.

"Our association has greatly improved in its organization and man-

agement," Bill says of the WGCSA. But he has problems with one change. "I strongly object that the officers go along with allowing members to be charged to play golf at the meetings. The greens fee has gotten so high that many of those superintendents who pay their own expenses have been priced out of attendance."

"Did any changes take place with the WGCSA while you were its president (1968-69)?" I ask.

"The greater changes came after I was out of office," he answers. "We were at a plateau. But those younger kids they've got now, they changed it for the better (except for the greens fee charge). The association has some real nice, intelligent kids."

There also was a change in attitude among the younger superintendents in the mid 1970s, Bill believes. "For the older superintendents, our idea of the job was that we had to work seven days a week, 14 hours a day," he says. "The younger ones don't work as many hours—which is a good change.

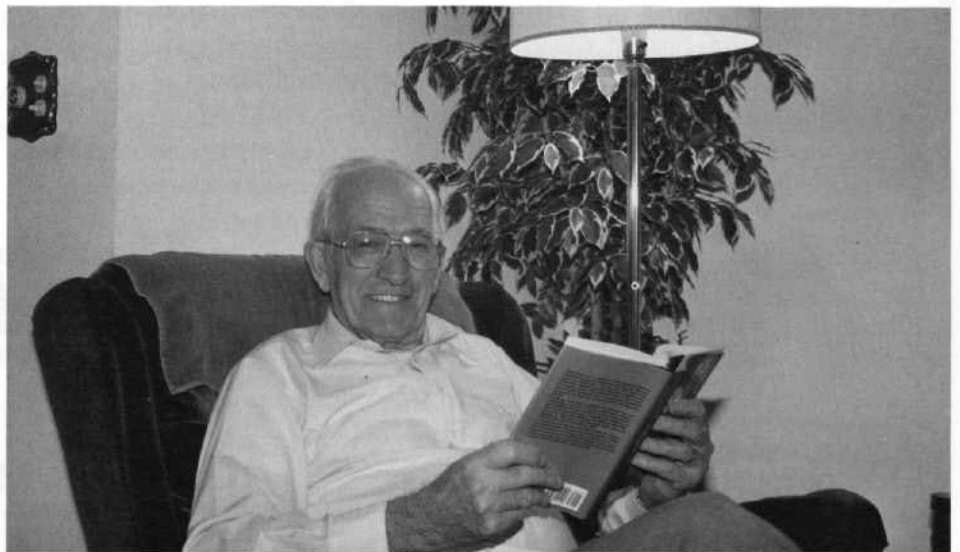
"The profession was good to me, and I like to think I was good to the profession," Bill adds.

"What do you feel were your contributions to the profession?" I inquire.

Bill pauses for a moment and shifts in his chair. "I was raised and trained not to be boastful." And then he returns to the closet and pulls out some scrapbooks. Apparently it's easier to show me what he has done than to tell me.

While paging through the scrapbooks I notice that Bill was one of four people to receive the Distinguished Service Award from the WGCSA in 1982, so he must have contributed

*(Continued on page 33)*



Bill Sell has more time to read now that he's retired.

(Continued from page 31)

something to the association and profession even if he wouldn't tell me!

He shows me pictures and drawings of some things that he designed—a new shop, a hydraulic work bench and a contraption that he used to lay electric lines on a golf course. I've never been very mechanical, so I don't quite understand what they're all about. But I am sensitive, so I can easily feel the pride with which he tells me.

The scrapbook reveals that Bill had a massive heart attack in 1982, but he informs me that his health has been quite good lately. "I can do most everything as long as I don't overdo it," says this 75-year-old.

And I learn that he attended the University of Massachusetts winter turf school in 1959. "I believe my field training was just as important, but sometimes it helps to have that piece of paper," he adds.

"What does it take to be a good superintendent?" I ask.

"Dedication. Of course, you have to have some knowledge. But, if you've got the dedication, you'll acquire the knowledge."

It's the personal letters in the scrapbooks that mean the most to Bill. One, in particular, comes from a former crew member who wanted to quit when things didn't go as he expected on the golf course. Years later, upon Bill's retirement, the man wrote to thank Bill for making him "stick it out" on the job and learn a valuable lesson in life.

A few other letters compliment Bill on the playing conditions of his course. "My biggest satisfaction is that, regardless of the type of course—private or public—that the course was always in better playing condition when I left than

before I got there," Bill relates. "Nothing earth shattering. It was a good life, a good run."

Before I leave, Bill takes me down to the storage unit of his condominium so I can see his golf ball collection. I marvel at how neatly everything is stored while he points out a few other mementoes.

Back upstairs, we say our good byes. I leave, glad that I had a chance to meet Bill Sell in person. Glad that I had a chance to visit with this organizer and collector of history, of memories, and of "stuff". 🍷

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