



CHRISTMAS AT STINKY'S

By Monroe S. Miller

All the guys in our town start thinking about our annual Christmas party right about the time we get together for the Symposium. More than a few times we've asked ourselves why we have to go clear to Milwaukee to visit about our Christmas celebration.

The answer is obvious. For whatever reason—coincidence or otherwise—we don't get together much in our town. All the golf course superintendents still pretty much are hands-on, leaving little time for socializing. Oh, we go to monthly meetings with pretty good regularity. But it takes Field Day or the Symposium to get us all in the same place at the same time.

And Field Day, in mid-August, is no time to plan for Christmas. Good grief—at that time we are still praying to hang on through Labor Day. Better days are ahead after that, days better suited for thinking about our favorite holiday.

I don't know how long an event has to go on for it to become a tradition. But this is a tradition, by anybody's definition. It started out simply enough. When Professor Love retired, he invited the superintendents in town who were his former students for lunch at Stinky's Bar & Grill. It was at Christmas time and even though he didn't intend it to be a holiday party, it sort of was. That was probably a dozen years ago, and have we ever had a lot of fun in those years.

Stinky's seems an unlikely place for a Christmas party, but it is close for everybody and easy to get to. None of us are known for hanging out in taverns, but we are a pretty happy group and need to gather at a, well, less sophisticated venue than one of the clubs. You never know when one of the guys might misbehave! Last year one of them suggested Hooters for a change, but he was shot down like a low flying goose. We aren't that dumb!

Besides, we all like Stinky's. It is friendly, roomy and has decent food (if

you're careful about what you choose from the menu). Plus, we all like Stinky O'Malley a lot. He is an Irishman who likes good cigars and golf. He is always bugging one of us for a freebie round. And we always try to comply at least once each season.

I never heard how he got his nickname, but I wouldn't be surprised if it came from the odd array of food he serves. Big one-gallon jars of pickled boiled eggs are on the bar. I couldn't gag one of those smelly things down if my life depended on it. "You're not much of a man" Stinky says when I tell him he should run them all down the garbage disposal because they aren't fit to eat. Hors d'oeuvres at Stinky's means platters of herring, sardines in mustard sauce and anchovies; they all require a strong stomach. He slathers everything with kraut and onions, and baked beans are about the only side dish he offers. I accused him once of using smelly food to cover up for his lousy cooking. "Why do you keep coming back then?" he asked me. With my usual wit, I said nothing, knowing I'd been had.

The most popular order at Stinky's is his State Fair Sandwich. You cannot get it anywhere else in town. He takes two slices of dark rye bread, lays in a thick slab of Limburger cheese, adds a slice of raw onion and several slices of raw apple. The onion and apple are to cover up the bad smell of the Limburger.

"Why do you serve such an awful sandwich, Stinky?"

"It's my trademark. I put three kids through college on the famous Stinky State Fair Sandwich," he said. Then he smiled his wide Irish grin.

A big orange cat roams the bar, checking everybody over. "Keeps the rodent population down to a minimum," was Stinky's only comment.

There is the main bar room at Stinky's and several eating rooms off to the side of it. One was sort of a

game room—pool table, darts, fireplace—and another was the RUSH room, nearly a reverent place these days. And really popular. Most of Stinky's customers like big government as much as Mr. Limbaugh does. They feel a kinship with the big guy.

Phoebe O'Malley, Stinky's wife, is there as much as Stinky is. She is an earthy gal who, despite her popularity with the patrons, takes no grief from anyone, including her husband.

The normal anticipation we always feel was amplified this year because we were initiating a new member into our group. Chuck Koval retired from the UW-Madison and became eligible to join us. Everyone was either a former student of one of the profs or an emeritus professor. For myself, it was sad in a way. All the faculty who once so greatly influenced so many Wisconsin golf course superintendents were now retired. Where has the time, where have the years gone? I wondered if

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any of the other guys felt the melancholy that swept through me when I was alone and thought of these faculty members, now retired, and former students, some now in their 50's.

But once I was in Stinky's and saw the happy friendly faces of these guys I'd known forever, some who had worked for me and one who I had worked for, the feeling in the pit of my stomach went away. Sheer, unadulterated joy and holiday cheer took over.

The hot and humid and miserable weather made winter welcome, at least for now. Come February, it would be a different story. I'd seen the first snowflake fall before it was even light outside this morning. The barometer had been tumbling fast since midnight and the state was ready for a good, old-fashioned Wisconsin snow. Most were glad—it would mean a white Christmas.

By 11:00 o'clock, when we were meeting at Stinky's, the zinc colored sky hung low over the city and the snow was coming thicker by the hour. It was now an undulating blanket on the landscape, fresh and undisturbed. It was piling up on the spruce and pine branches, making them truly look like outdoor Christmas trees. It settled against the window panes at Stinky's, softening the red and green and yellow lights of the Christmas decorations inside.

Once or twice a year silent snow reminded me of Whittier's *Snowbound* that we had memorized in our one-room grade school:

*The sun that brief December day
Rose cheerless over hills of gray.*

It's a grand old poem that brings back memories of snowstorms in southwest Wisconsin in my youth. Schools closed for days, but farmers went on, doing chores and enjoying the beauty of it since there was nothing they could do to change it.

Nowadays I wondered about the Sac and Fox and Kickapoo Indians who lived at various times on the land of our golf course hundreds of years ago. They must have been hardy, trying to stay warm in deerskin tepees or bark and reed wickiups. They were tough, living on venison and corn and nuts.

Here in town in 1995 there would be all sorts of griping about slippery roads and slow traffic and a dozen other urban hardships brought on by the snow that was falling. To me, living out a heavy snowstorm is a nice challenge

to resourcefulness and ingenuity, virtues in short supply and too rarely exercised these days.

I knocked the snow off my boots best I could before opening the door to the bar. Even then I could hear the Christmas music above the din of the crowd. Snow swirled inside when I opened the door, and a big cloud of steam, probably from the crowd and the kitchen, escaped as I went in. My glasses were fogged over almost instantly.

Even though I couldn't see for a second, I heard our gang—Bogey Calhoun hollering to me, "hey, Dogpatch Country Club, over here!" I heard Scottie Fennimore laughing at him, encouraging more wise cracks.

I wiped the condensation from the lenses and put my glasses back on. The first person I saw was Doc Love. Then Prof Worf and Bob Newman. The newly retired Koval was at the end of the big table, talking to Tom Morris.

"How," I wondered to myself, "can I be the last one here when I have the shortest distance to go?"

Being in Stinky's bar was almost like being at home. It was warm and comfortable and clean. Phoebe O'Malley had strings of Christmas lights everywhere. Pine boughs, too, fragrant and green. There were three Christmas trees that I could see—one each in the bar, the Rush room and the game room. Stinky came over, asked me if I wanted anything and said I could leave his present under the tree in the Rush room.

"No presents for you, Stinky," I said. "Maybe a stick or a brick or a piece of coal. But no presents. You haven't been that good this year!"

Stinky peered at me over the top of his glasses, feigning some modest anger. Then he smiled and said "Well, I'm not getting you anything either."

I moved over to our table in the middle of the controlled chaos and noise of another busy lunch crowd at Stinky's. I sat down next to Steady Eddie Middleton and Larry Strike. "What fun!" I thought to myself.

Love and Newman were arguing over some trivial intellectual tidbit that left the rest of us clueless as to what they were talking about. Worf was trying to brag about his summer fishing exploits, but the guys were more interested in talking about turf diseases. Koval was still wondering, and worrying too I thought, about what was involved in the initiation ceremony of our group.

Morris was perched in his usual catbird perch, waiting for his chance to make a little trouble. He reminded me of a guy who sat near the fire with a thimble of gasoline. When the flames died down, he'd splash a little gas and get the fire roaring again. If the conversation lagged for even a minute, he'd say something about Calhoun's slow greens or Middleton's deep bunker sand or Fennimore's weedy roughs, and the arguments were off to the races again. And he would only smile, moving his head from side to side, above the fracas and grinning as we went after each other. Somehow, we never got around to raking him over the coals!

Our orders came, by and by. We all passed on Stinky's stinky food and ordered more traditional fare—bowls of hot clam chowder, hot turkey sandwiches with mashed potatoes and gravy, and a few tasty Reuben sandwiches.

By and by, Chuck was made to believe that whatever the price of initiation, it was going to be worth it. He was having a good time.

Bogey motioned for Phoebe to come over as we were finishing our meals and pushing the plates to the center of the table.

"Bring each of us our usual, Phoebe—a tall glass of cold winter ale and one of the special Honduran cigars Stinky keeps beneath the bar. Put it all on the tab."

(Continued on page 33)

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(Continued from page 31)

I saw Bogey motion to Phoebe again. She leaned over so he could whisper something to her. I knew what it was. So did everybody else. Except the unsuspecting Professor Koval.

I pushed my chair back, looked at each man individually and smiled. It was a fine moment as I saw the once young and now aging friends I'd known for so long. We had all worked hard this past summer and worried a lot. But now, finally, each man was relaxed and happy.

It was a Norman Rockwell Christmas scene. Or maybe Grandma Moses, with a family-like quality to it. More and more as the years have

gone by I have discovered that Christmas is a season that must be shared with others outside of your family, too. This was the perfect example.

Hard to believe, but the smell of the pine boughs and the cigar smoke and the plates of roast turkey from the kitchen was wonderful and familiar and friendly. How could the place be called "Stinky's"?

Koval was asked to stand for the induction and initiation ceremony. He looked around the table carefully with a little suspicion. Tom Morris babbled a few paragraphs about the group, our long history and great tradition. He had humbled Chuck—you could see it on

his face—and had led him up to the great climax of initiation.

"Here it is, Chuck, evidence that are now officially one of us, this august group." With that, Tom handed him the tab and took a long flavorful drag on his cigar. "You're in!"

The guys roared; Koval looked at the tab and said, "I'm not sure I want to join you characters!"

The Christmas music in the background reminded me to look out the window. It was still snowing, making it look more and more like Christmas.

And already, after such a good time, I knew it would be a happy holiday. For all of us, including our new member. ♣

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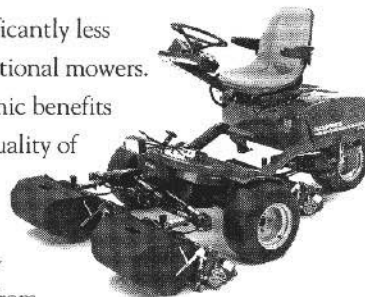
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