



THE BOAT RIDE

By Monroe S. Miller

The phone rang. I ignored it for three rings and Dave finally asked “do you want me to get that?”

“Please,” I said. “But I’m not here. I am not in the mood for a protracted conversation with someone who has time on his hands. Take a message for me.”

It hadn’t been a good morning. The sun came up early and bright, portending the kind of midsummer day that can be tough on a golf course in Wisconsin.

The heat was one thing. But a week’s worth of problems over the course of a short three hours is something else. Two of the guys on the crew were late—too much beer and cigar smoking at the Blue Moon for their own good. They probably should have stayed home for all the good they were when they finally arrived.

Then there were mower breakdowns. Walking greensmowers don’t leak hydraulic oil, but they have failures that can drive you crazy—belt failures. We had two hauled back into the shop before they had cut one green between them. Another caught a piece of a twig on the frame and scratched about five passes on the 12th green before I caught it and got it squared away. Some of the damage was bad enough that it had to be hand knitted for repair.

A sprinkler had stuck most of the night on the eighth green. Fortunately it stopped turning so the green wasn’t flooded. But the bunker on the south side was full of water, and the sand from the greenside face was washed down onto the bunker floor. After we pumped the water out, a crew had to hand shovel the sand into place.

And, of course, we spotted some disease on a couple of tees. Our interval was stretched, but rather than tool up and send equipment out to do all of them, we spot treated the problem areas with a granular product.

It seemed perfectly fitting that last

night a local hoodlum decided to commit some overdue vandalism, pitching several ballwashers and a couple of sticks and flags into the pond. That was the touche of the morning.

Dave picked up the phone and although I wasn’t listening closely, I could tell it was someone familiar and someone he liked. I looked over, saw he was laughing and wondered who it was. Just then he covered the mouthpiece and whispered to me “it’s Tom Morris. He would like to talk to you for a second.”

I unlocked my office door, sat down behind my desk and pick up the receiver. “Yeah,” I said. “What do you want?”

Tom hesitated a second and then said “this could be your lucky call. You sound like you are in a foul mood and I have an offer that will pull you out of it.”

Morris sounded like his day was going as well as mine was going poorly. “Unless you tell me I’ve just won the lottery, I am probably not interested,” I replied.

“Not exactly,” he said, “but it is almost as good. How about a boat ride?”

Silence. An offer for a boat ride with Tom Morris isn’t something I dismissed too quickly, ever.

Several times every season he would call, most often when it was hot, and make the same offer. Not once had I turned him down.

We live in a great town for boating. We had the four lakes—Mendota, Monona, Waubesa and Kegonsa—and the Yahara River that connected them. Lake Wingra was another lake in town, but it was isolated and we didn’t count it. Several of the golf courses in the city were on the shores of one of the four lakes. Tom’s course and mine were among them.

Morris had grown up on the smallest of the four lakes and had been in

love with the water all of his life. I never knew him when he didn’t own a boat.

“You know what, Tom?” I asked. Before he could answer I offered that “a relaxing trip around the lake would do me a lot of good right now.”

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I hadn't caught my breath yet, and I had been going full speed since before sunrise. It was almost noon now.

"Great," he said with a lot of enthusiasm in his voice. It will take me about five minutes to get to the launch, another five minutes to get underway and five minutes to get across the lake. I'll meet you at your marina."

"See you there!" I said. It was a perfect setup. Our pump station was right next to our marina. So I would drive to the pumphouse, park my golf car, walk over to the marina—less than 50 yards—and go out the boardwalk to the last slip where Tom would pick me up. When the boat ride was over, he'd drop me off at the same place. I just had to walk to the pumphouse, get my golf car and go back to work. It was great.

Usually I would tell somebody—Dave most often—where I was and when I would be back. For some reason I was halfway to the pumphouse before I thought about it. Rather than turn back—I never took a radio with me—I figured for once it wouldn't do any harm. Things weren't going good

enough to be gone long anyway.

Just like clockwork, Tom and I arrived at the end of the marina walk at the same time. "Morning, Tom!" I greeted him.

"You sound in better spirits than you did an hour ago," he said as he smiled and pushed his state trooper sunglasses back on his nose. Then he pulled the bill of his sea captain hat down so it almost touched his shades.

"I am," I answered. And I really was. There is something soothing about these rides we take on the lakes. It was quiet and peaceful and, even on really hot days, a whole lot cooler on the water than it was on the golf course.

Once I was safely on board I gave a shove against the pier and we were off. Tom moved slowly to open water. We then turned east and followed the shoreline from a couple hundred yards out.

The tension was melting away, and it felt good to begin to feel relaxed. We were just poking along, looking at the mansions that faced the lake. I was used to seeing them from the street side; this perspective made it clear that the lakeside was the front

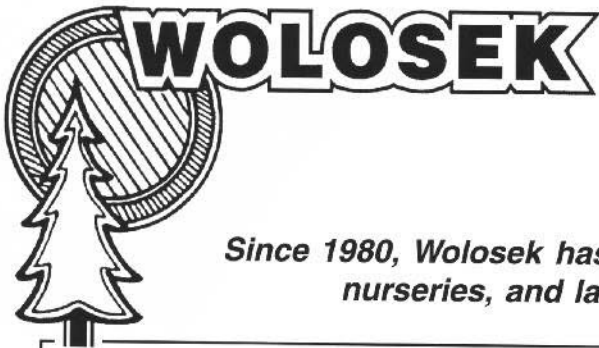
of most and the street side was the back.

Some had broad expanses of lawn down to the shore; others were wooded lots. Every so often we'd see a very rustic small structure set dead center in a property, an obvious remnant of the past when it was an out-of-town summer cabin.

We made the bend around Picnic Point into University Bay, moved closer to shore as we cruised by the great University of Wisconsin campus. It was as beautiful from the water as it was when on land or even when viewed from the air. Three generations of our family had lived near Lake Mendota while we were students at the UW, enjoying the shoreline landmarks—the crew house, the Union Terrace, the cinder path from Willow Drive to Langdon Street, and the old Red Gym.

"Boy, Tom, this is great," I gushed to my long time colleague. "I needed to get away for awhile. You are a life-saver."

"If you need a Coke, there are some in the cooler," Tom said as he reached for one for himself. He never
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went anywhere without some refreshments close at hand.

"It is amazing how quickly your problems dissolve when you get away from them for a little bit," I observed while leaning back and popping open a soda.

"That's why I'm here," Tom replied.

"I remember the first time you took this boat onto the water, Tom."

He smiled. "So do I."

In one of his rare goofs, he had pulled a boner worthy of a complete idiot. When the boat was new I was with him on the other side of the lake, helping with its virgin launch. We got it in the water, I pulled his Explorer and boat trailer up the ramp and found a parking place close by. In the meantime he had the big Mercury boat motor running and had maneuvered to the pier to get me. I hopped in, strapped on a life preserver and sat back to enjoy the maiden voyage. Tom thought he was pretty smart as we slowly moved out of the harbor toward open water.

Suddenly other boaters were yelling at us, waving their arms and laughing. Tom looked around with an innocent look on his face before glancing down and realizing they were laughing at us. He hadn't put a drain plug in and we were taking on water like crazy!

I looked over the side and the rear of the boat was only six inches above the water level. We were sinking! Morris was flat on his belly, half covered with water and fumbling to put the plug in. He got it, stood up and the world saw a very embarrassed man.

"If you tell anybody about this, Miller, I'll kill you." He sounded serious.

"Don't worry, Tom," I replied. "My lips are sealed. I won't tell a soul."

Of course by the end of the next day I'd called at least twenty people and told them about the great sea captain, Tom Morris.

About three days after that humiliating incident, Tom called and said "let's try it again."

"Great," I said. "Same place, same time?"

"Yup," he said.

Everything went smoothly. He had the drain in, the launch was easy and quick, and the lake was calm. We rode Mendota for quite a time and decided to pull into the Middleton harbor. No pier. "No problem," Tom

assessed. "We'll float into shallow water, drop anchor and wade onto shore.

He waited until he thought the boat's momentum would carry us in, cut the engine and looked at me smugly as we drifted toward the beach.

"This looks good," he said. With that he reached down, picked up the anchor and with a mighty heave, let it go.

My last vision was of a 1/2 inch, 30-foot length of bright yellow rope flashing through the sky.

Morris screamed. "Damnit." Then he looked over at me. I had collapsed into the seat and was holding my side as I doubled with laughter.

Captain Tom had forgotten to tie the anchor to the boat! It now had a watery grave in Lake Mendota.

"Aren't you going to dive and look for it?" I asked between guffaws.

"Screw it," he said. The man was mad.

Far be it from me to rub a little salt into a wounded ego. "You know, Morris, they should hire you to pilot the QEII on ocean voyages—sort of a 'surprise tour package'. With you at the helm, there'd be some surprises!"

"Keep it up and I am going to take you to the middle of the lake, throw you overboard and let you swim home."

"I can't swim," I reminded him.

"Exactly," came the reply from Tom.

So far today, however, the day had been perfect. He swung the boat a little to the north and we had a full view of our beautiful state capitol building, the isthmus, and James Madison park. We followed the shore until the Governor's Mansion came into full view.

"I'll be damned," Tom said with genuine surprise in his voice. "Isn't that the Governor on the pier?"

I looked and was certain it was. We both waved to the man who is probably the best governor in the entire history of the state of Wisconsin. Tommy Thompson waved back to us.

We made a big left handed hook past the village of Maple Bluff back to the middle of the lake and drew a bead on the locks at Tenney Park. Tom wanted to do a quick cruise of Lake Monona before we went back to work.

It was a beautiful day. The lake was perfectly calm, the sky was blue

and the breeze was light. Old Henry Thoreau hit the mark when he said "a lake is the landscapes most beautiful and expressive feature. It is the earth's eye." No doubt that sentiment explained why water features on golf courses were so important.

"What a day, Tom. This is great!"

Then the engine quit. I looked at Tom; he looked at me and turned the key to off. He tried to restart the Merc but no luck.

"What's going on?" I wasn't in a panic, but I was uneasy.

"I don't know," came the reply. He sounded like he really didn't know. He turned the engine over two or three more times. It didn't start. Like any normal male, we both started wiggling wires, tapping the carb and electronic package and anything else the might be a candidate. It still didn't start.

My face flushed red as I thought the unthinkable. "You aren't out of gas are you?"

Tom looked at me and I knew instantly that was it. "I forgot to fuel up after I called you." He twisted the gas cap off, looked into the tank and said "nothing but fumes."

I was mad. "You chump. How in bloody hell could you forget to fuel this thing?" I asked incredulously. "I've seen your act when a MLCC crew member forgets to fuel a mower. You ought to practice what you preach. You don't happen to have a gas can with a little fuel in it on board, do you?"

"No."

There we sat, barely moving, now cooking in the hot sun. It was a lot cooler when the boat was moving.

"How could you forget to fuel up?"

"Would you shut up," Tom said. "Your whining and bellyaching won't change the circumstances. All you'll do is grind on my nerves. Keep it up and you are going overboard."

"This is really super, Tom. My wife knows I didn't sleep good last night, my crew knows I have been stressed out. They all know it was a bumpy road this morning. My golf car is parked by the pump station, by the lakeshore. Everybody knows I cannot swim. I can hear the six o'clock news headline: *Local golf course superintendent finds peace in the depths of Lake Mendota. Dane County officials are dragging the lake for the body. Details at 10.*"

"You're a sick puppy," Tom said. "Calm down. Somebody will come by, we'll flag them down and get help."

"Look around, Tom. Nobody's on the lake. Who do you plan on flagging?"

"Boaters will be here, trust me. Stay cool."

I wasn't cool; I was hot. I was worried. The crew will wonder where I am. Irrigation has to be set up. Plans have to be made for tomorrow. My family has no idea where I am. I don't normally "disappear" with long stays at the tavern or anywhere else. Mr. Dependable, that's me. A creature of habit. A worrier par excellence. This episode will not end well; I could feel it.

Tom had settled back into his high back seat and popped open another Coke. He didn't seem concerned.

"You know," he started, "this isn't so bad after all. It is sort of a forced respite from the summer's hassles. I kind of like it. Have a soda."

I slouched back into my seat slowly accepting the circumstances I obviously couldn't change. Time passed. Tom Morris and I had been friends since we were teenagers and had worked together summers at area courses. Nearly 30 years later, we were still best of friends. If I had to be stranded with somebody, Tom was better than almost anybody else I could think of.

We visited about everything, from our kids to our careers, from the past times to the future times. We even talked about Bogey Calhoun's golf course olympics. "I still think he should have a 1000 yard dash for the 68 inch National Mowers," Tom laughed, adding, "with cutting units down!"

We smeared our faces with sun screen, argued over which radio station to listen to, and I continued to fret as the sun dropped lower and lower in the western sky.

"For the last time, quit complaining," Tom barked at me. "Have another Coke."

"I can't," I replied. "My bladder is ready to burst now."

Tom laughed. "You are dumb. Go ahead and relieve yourself."

"Where? How?"

"Over the edge of the boat," he replied simply.

"Oh, there'd be a sight."

"It's up to you. I don't much care if you are miserable or not. It isn't as if you'll have an audience."

It took five minutes for me to get desperate enough to find the courage to stand up and take a leak over the side of Tom's boat. When I finally did, the relief was overwhelming.

And with that, out of nowhere, the sheriff's lake patrol boat roared up. There was nothing I could do. Except finish my job.

"Do you think this lake is your private latrine?" The deputy sounded gruff, until I saw the smirk on his face. "Do you boys have a problem?"

"We're out of gas," Tom answered. "Have been for hours."

The deputy stepped to the back of his patrol boat, picked up a gallon can and handed it to Tom with "this should get you back to shore."

Tom dumped the fuel into the tank and I passed the can back to the cop, adding "wait a second until we see if it starts."

Tom turned the key, the boat motor roared to life, and we waved to the patrol boat.

When we were near the marina I could see that my crew had taken my golf car back to the shop. I'd have to walk there, across the golf course. I didn't care, not at this point. Land would feel good beneath my feet.

Tom maneuvered the boat close to the pier and I jumped out. We looked at each other and I slowly smiled.

"Thanks for the boat ride, Tom. I'll never forget it." ♣



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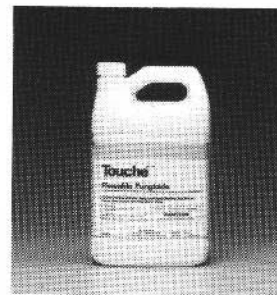
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