



REMINISCENCE

By Monroe S. Miller

Usually, I barely have two sentences out of my mouth before they start to roll their eyes, as if to say, "oh, boy, here we go again—another trip down Memory Lane." I eat lunch nearly everyday all year with our golf course staff and it is inevitable that some conversations end up with some serious reminiscing by me and the guys who are either my age (or older) or who have a term of service similar to mine. I think remembering past experiences is human nature. Some of the kids who work for me think it is all kind of boring!

Granted, most of these musings are sentimental, even Platonic. Someone once noted that reminiscence is "remembering the pleasure of sitting in front of a big fireplace without remembering you had to cut the wood for it." There is truth in that. When I think back to my incredibly happy childhood on a Wisconsin dairy farm I tend not to recall 100 degree F. days spent in the top of the hay mow or the -20 degree F. days hauling manure. I think, mostly, of the good things. That is human nature, too.

Some researchers look at reminiscing as an enhancement to spiritual growth, relaxation, communication, psychological well-being and self-concept. I don't know what their studies show or what the empirical evidence

is, but I can say it is all of those things for me. When my family—parents, brother and sisters—get together, we talk endlessly of our common pasts and those who have gone before us in our family. One thing is for sure—reminiscing has great value to us in adding deeper meaning to our experiences.

No doubt—reminiscences among our family members about what has happened among us is the reason *All Saints Sunday* is about my favorite church service (excepting Easter and Christmas). It is comforting to sit through that service, page through our personal history of human relationships and recall the memories of loved ones who have passed on. The service reminds me that even the little moments count, that what we do with life and relationships every day matters. We sing the hymn that has the lines,

*"I will remember the days of old,
And worship the Lord of Creation.
I will always remember the stories
told*

*By those of the past generations.
I'll sing with all the saints who've
gone before*

*And sing with all the saints of earth.
And I'll always remember the
stories told*

By those of the past generations."

It becomes clearer, knowing the above, as to why I love to travel in the East (rich in American history), why I love to study genealogy (family history) and why I serve as WGCSA chapter historian (career history).

Last fall I bought a couple of great golf books, both used and both autobiographies—*The Walter Hagen Story* (by The Haig himself!) and *This Life I've Led* (by Babe Didrikson Zaharias). Neither is great literature, but both were really great reading—pure pleasure, really. They are life stories told in a natural and informal style.

It is pretty easy to make the case that a self-written story of your life is reminiscing. In each of these books, two of the greatest players golf has known have stories to tell about Wisconsin. I enjoyed them and bet you will enjoy the reminiscing about Wisconsin these two great golfers did, too.

Babe Didrikson was the daughter of Norwegian immigrant parents who settled in Beaumont, Texas. She was one of the premier women athletes in the country from the early 1930s on into the 1950s, and she was probably the best known, too. Between 1930 and 1932 she held American, Olympic or world records in five different track and field events. During the AAU national meet of 1932, she entered as



the sole member of the Golden Cyclones. Babe scored thirty points in the meet. The next best team, the Illinois Women's Athletic Club, had twenty-two members who scored a total of twenty-two points!

In the Olympics at Los Angeles, she won gold medals and set world records in the 80-meter hurdles and the javelin, breaking the javelin record by an amazing eleven feet. She tied for first place in the high jump, setting another world record!

She was an All-American basketball player in 1930, 1931 and 1932 and led her team to the national championship in 1931. She often scored thirty or more points a game in an era when twenty points for an entire team was common. She was an excellent softball player who pitched and batted over .400 in a Dallas city league. She was an excellent bowler with a 170 average. She could punt a football seventy-five yards, and she could swim very close to world record times in the shorter distances. Six times—in 1932, 1945, 1946, 1947, 1950 and 1954—she was voted Woman Athlete of the Year by the Associated Press. In 1950, the AP picked her as the Woman Athlete of the Half Century.

But she was best known for her ability as a golfer. As a professional and an amateur, she won eighty-two

golf tournaments. In the mid-1940s she won a record seventeen consecutive tournaments, capping that string in 1947 by becoming the first American to win the British Ladies Amateur Championship. In 1954, only fifteen months after undergoing radical surgery for cancer of the rectum, she won the US Women's Open in Salem, Massachusetts by a shattering twelve strokes. I wonder of the record has ever been broken?

In her time she played matches all across the country with Gene Sarazan and Patty Berg, both GCSAA Old Tom Morris Award winners. Her story from Wisconsin goes like this:

"I'd missed the Western Women's Open in 1939 because I was out of the country, but I was back in there to shoot for the title in 1940. The Women's Western Open was held in Milwaukee that year at the Blue Mound Golf and Country Club. I hadn't succeeded in getting past the semifinals in this tournament the three previous times I'd tried.

I really had myself a time in the 1940 Western. I even cause some excitement in a practice round by shooting a seventy-five, which was women's par at Blue Mound. In the Qualifying round I slipped to an eighty-one, but I was still only two strokes away from winning the medal.

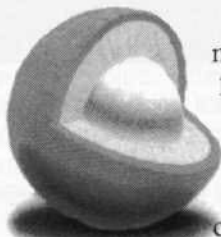
On the first day of match play I was paired against an Iowa girl, Phyllis Otto, who was only fifteen years old then, but a real comer. I shot a seventy-eight, the best score of the day, and beat her by six-and-four. I kept going on from there. One day I had a seventy-three to set a new Wisconsin women's record, and then I broke the record in another match with a seventy-two. I beat Mrs. J.A. Ochiltree, Mrs. F.W. Zimmerman and Georgia Tainter to reach the semifinals.

There I met Dorothy Foster of Springfield, Illinois. She'd eliminated me from this same tournament back in 1937. I didn't have a very good day against her in the 1940 tournament, either. We were all even after nine holes. Then I pulled a little ahead. I went two up on her at the fifteenth. On the sixteenth she made a real bid with a birdie, but I holed out a ten-footer to score a birdie myself. Another birdie on the seventeenth gave me the match by three-and-one.

In the finals I was up against Mrs. Russell Mann, the Wisconsin state champion. This was her home course we were playing on. But I wanted this title so bad I could taste it. It was by first chance to win a golf tournament in five years—the last one had been the 1935 Texas state women's championship.

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Mrs. Mann kept the pressure on me all the way. It was a thirty-six hole match, and she was one up at the end of the morning round. In the afternoon I caught up to her and slowly pulled away. It was the first nine holes in the afternoon that did it—I shot a thirty-six. I closed out the match on the thirty-second hole to win by five-and-four."

Walter Hagen's life story made an absolutely super book. He played during an earlier time than Babe; he won his first U.S. Open in 1914. He played in the years of Ouimet and Vardon, Braid and Ray, Armour and Sarazan and all the other famous names of golf in the 1920s and 1930s.

Here is Walter Hagen reminiscing about one of his "favorite" Wisconsin trips:

"In those hectic twenties and thirties I was always booked pretty solid for exhibition matches between the scheduled circuit tournaments and championships. Exhibitions were my bread and butter and while I could count on at least a half-dozen bookings a week, making them on time often created quite a problem. Meeting me in Chicago one summer during such a series, Bob Harlow arranged an exhibition match in Menominee, a city north of Chicago, for the following Sunday. I was a bit indefinite as to the exact location, so Bob made an X on the map showing the town to be at the southern tip of Michigan, at the boundary of Wisconsin on Green Bay.

I borrowed Al Wallace's car and chauffeur and left Chicago early Saturday evening so I might spend that night with my good friends Mr. and Mrs. Wall. I had often played golf with them and their daughter Bernice, who competed in many of the women's championships. After an enjoyable visit with them I left for the scheduled match. I turned the map over to the chauffeur and spread myself and the Sunday papers on the back seat of the car. Upon arriving in Menominee we drove directly to the golf club where I presumed the exhibition was to be played. The lack of activity didn't particularly upset me until the manager appeared and expressed quite a lot of surprise at my unexpected, yet welcome visit. I explained why I was there.

"Am I early?" I asked.

The manager told me he knew of no exhibition and suggested it might be scheduled for a neighboring club.

We drove into town and over lunch I learned of another city in Wisconsin existed with a spelling very similar, Menomonie, situated near St. Paul and about two hundred and fifty miles west of where I was then.

I immediately got on the telephone and talked to the president of the club in Wisconsin.

"Where are you?" he inquired anxiously.

"I'm in Menominee, Michigan," I told him.

"Get a plane! Get a plane! he urged desperately. "We're waiting for you! There are two thousand people here!"

"It's two o'clock now," I said. "Not even a plane, if I could get one, would land me in your town in time to play. If you'll explain my situation to my gallery and to your members, I'll certainly make it up to your club at a later date."

Knowing how my nonappearance would appear to the public and to the waiting gallery, I realized I needed adequate confirmation of my *Corrigan*. I called the president of the Chamber of Commerce of Menominee, Michigan. He met me at the restaurant and I asked him to have published in the local paper a story to the effect that I had pulled a *Corrigan* and gone the wrong way—I'd veered right when I should have veered left. I also requested that he send copies of the article both to me and to the president of the golf club in Wisconsin!"

Oh, by the way, The Haig had a connection to Carl Grassl's golf course, too; he won the 1916 Western Open at Blue Mound.

Hagen, during his time, marveled at the progress golf had made, progress not just in the golf balls and implements, but progress on the golf courses, too. Here he is again, speaking in 1956 about what he had seen in his life of golf. Remember, he was born in 1893 and was a head pro (CC of Rochester, NY) in 1912:

"Golf courses in the United States in my early days were mainly *au naturel*, far removed from the scientifically designed courses of today. The rough was just what the name denotes—rough. The roughs of grass and weeds alternating with uninhibited bushes and trees contrast strangely with the trim, barbered rough of our best courses today. On those early fairways the grass was cut or schythed, the greens were mowed. Today's greens are carefully rolled

and contoured and today's traps instead of bunkers artfully spotted so as to increase the challenge and reward the accuracy, judgment of distance, and skill resulting from the latest improvements in the implements of the game. The transition of the early 1900s to the rubber-cored ball necessitated a changing of the courses. Holes were lengthened, bogies and pars lowered. So the hopped-up ball and the steel-shafted clubs manufactured today make the expertly planned courses a definite must in the game if the skill of low-scoring golfers is to be tested."

I wish The Haig was alive to see the golf courses of 1996. He would not believe his eyes.

While exercising my duties as morning session chairman at last year's USGA Green Section meeting at Maple Bluff, I read from an older book I have—*The Golf Course Guide*. It was published in 1950, indicating to me that some of the descriptions it contained could have been gathered a couple years prior to that.

The MBCC synopsis spoke of Washington bent greens and \$2 green fees. A number of friends stopped by to look up their golf course.

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from my old postcard collection of state golf courses.

Of my own golf course, "located 1 mile out of town (RFD 2)" the author commented, "The course is beautifully located, overlooking Lake Mendota, one of the twin jewels of the city. The fairways and bent greens are well maintained."

Steve Schmidt will especially be interested in the comments about Buttes Des Morts: "This is an interesting course, wooded, with a variety of holes, and a creek which is crossed seven times in the course of play. The club is proud of its greenkeeper, John Taylor, who has been maintaining this course for more than a quarter of a century."

I learned from this book how Lawsonia was named: "The story of this splendid golf course, designed by William Langford, is an interesting one. Victor Lawson, self-made millionaire, gave the area its name, for here he and his wife developed a magnificent estate on the shores of Green

Lake. In the mid-twenties a corporation bought it from his heirs and built a large resort hotel and the golf course, which ranked as one of the finest in the country. But financial difficulties over-took Lawsonia and in 1943 the Northern Baptist Assembly purchased the whole works for a fraction of the money that went into developing and building it.

The course has lovely, rolling fairways, well trapped, and large elevated tees. Bent greens and tees."

A big curiosity exists in the middle of the Wisconsin section. Read it for yourself: "This guide has been unable to solicit adequate information about the nearly 20 golf courses in Milwaukee. The best golf club in the city and the No. 1 course in Wisconsin is the 18-hole Milwaukee Country Club. Its beautiful clubhouse and its topnotch condition justify its reputation."

This old and interesting book reflects golf at the time of its printing. People wanted to know, for example,

if greens were "grass or sand." Distance from town was important, and so were green fees (almost all were 75¢ to \$2.00!) Washington bent greens were a big deal; designers (other than the William Lanford note) were not. Watered fairways were noted—there weren't many—and general landscape features seemed significant to 1950 golfers. This book was a great trip back to a time only a few of us remember.

Finally, while we are sharing reminiscing, let me share a piece Jim Latham sent to me. It is from the February 1928 (Vol.8, No.2) issue of *USGA Green Section Bulletin*. Read this slowly and make it last. It's a lot of fun!

Stepping from the eighteenth green with the Green Committee Chairman and the Greenkeeper, it was suggested that we "stick around and hear the angels sing. You will hear their daily chant to the Green Committee and Greenkeeper." So there we waited and watched.



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One Mr. Average Golfer soon waddled up to attempt what looked like a "dead sure one." In that terrifying silence, which preceded great storms, he went through all the most approved and prolonged preliminaries of sighting and preparing for that momentous tap. Horror of horrors, he missed! We guessed it; the green was all to blame. The storm broke!

"Bill, why in the name of galloping golf balls can't we have some greens on this course? These things would be a disgrace to any cow pasture. There isn't a golfer in the world who could putt on them." Ad Infinitum.

All this in spite of the fact that the other members of his foursome sank good, long shots and were last seen headed for the locker room with beaming faces not ordinarily associated with "rotten" greens and high scores.

The next group furnished this helpful suggestion: "If you fellows are interested in improving greens, why don't you first find out what the players

want? After all, greens are for the golfers and everything should be done to give them exactly what they want."

We beat him to that idea by many years. We had long ago been told "when baby cries, give him what he wants." But we had also learned that to obtain results it makes some difference whether baby is "crying for something" or "just crying."

The greenkeeper suggested that we question a few of the club's best players as to how fast they preferred to have greens. "One of my men is ill and that has interrupted our schedule. Number 16 has not been cut and is very slow today, but this eighteenth is the real 'lightning type.'" The first reply was:

"This green is perfect! Anyone can putt on it. If you could only get all our greens as fast as this one, every player in the city would be clamoring to join this club. Number 16? Is that supposed to be a green? We thought you were planning to let that grow up for hay."

"Fore!" The next foursome is having a terrible time rolling them back and forth across the green. "Bill, what on earth is the matter with this green? If you simply touch the ball, it goes clear across. No use trying to putt on it. Why can't we have all the greens like 'sixteen' is today? You can really hit a ball on that one without making it roll a mile."

Now that's settled! All that the green committees, greenkeepers and "those scientific guys" have to do to give the players just what they want (in speed of greens, at least) is to develop some kind of gear-shift. Then if a player "likes 'em fast" he can shift into high, and if he "likes 'em slow" he can shift to low. Bet some of them will want it fixed so they can shift to low after the ball is struck. Then they'll want a "reverse" so that the one which is "too strong" will roll back at just the right speed—all counting a single stroke!"

Jim's right, of course. Some things never change in golf! ♣

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