



# A Trip To Cobble Valley

By Monroe S. Miller

We were fired up. The golf courses in town were open and healed up from the winter dormancy, and our players were a happy group. Regardless of the club, members were feeling good this spring, and so were we.

That's why Tom Morris, Bogey Calhoun, Steady Eddie Middleton and I were going to the first golf meeting of the year for the Wisconsin Golf Course Superintendents Association. Morris had a new Badger red and white Ford Explorer to show off, so we all met at Stinky's Bar and Grill, parked our trucks (with Stinky's permission, of course) and climbed into Tom's brand spanking new vehicle.

"Nice wheels, Tom," I said, unable to disguise the little bit of envy I felt.

"Kids are out of college, so it is my turn for a share of family resources," Tom said with a smile. "Did you guys notice the boat hitch on the back bumper? Standard equipment from here on out. We will be going for a boat ride on Lake Mendota before you know it!"

Early in the first few days of any new golf season, Wisconsin golf course superintendents say this is their favorite season. So we all meant it as, one by one, we declared spring as our favorite of all. "I was in the UW arboretum," Steady Eddie announced, "and noticed the buds on the lilacs and the flowering crabapples are getting fat. There'll be an explosion of color before long."

Nobody in town let a spring go by without a few hours in the arboretum. It is one of the many things that makes our town a great one to live and work in. Who couldn't feel that, especially knowing how much Aldo Leopold loved the place and invested himself in it?

We were in great spirits for another reason. Our meeting was being hosted by Mac MacPherson, course superintendent at the Cobble Valley Country Club, near Homesburg, Wisconsin. Cobble Valley is the only golf course designed by A.W. Tillinghast in Wisconsin, although the great designer did some remodeling at another state course. This was his single start-to-finish creation. The small, three generation membership has left it unchanged from the master's original design. It has held up very well.

Or, so we think. The Cobble Valley members are a quiet lot, stay close to home and keep to themselves. They've chosen not to participate in the bigger world of golf in the state, preferring to have a few events with Cold Stream CC and Fair View CC members each year. Mac has tried to get meetings there, but he has been unsuccessful until now. J.C. Marsh, the green committee chair, helped him get this meeting. The board was reluctant, but Mac and Mr. Marsh prevailed.

So we were off to the Scotch Bluff area of Wisconsin, northwest of our town.

It is a pretty ride to Homesburg. We left Middleton, headed north/northwest on Highway 12. For me, each time I take the drive, it has a historic feel to it. The connection was easy—the road roughly follows the path Blackhawk and his band took in 1832 as they retreated from the Madison area, maybe even from a location on Lake Mendota's shore where our course is. Each time I think of that retreat and the ensuing battle of Wisconsin Heights, it tugs at my emotions. It was a sad event in history.





We weren't the only happy people on this spring day in Wisconsin. The words were few since we each had a window and we were "busy" watching farmers chisel plow and disk acres and acres in preparation for their corn crop. The freshly worked, dark brown soil contrasted sharply with the soft pale green of the newly emerged oat crop and the deep green of the alfalfa. Strip cropping and contour farming accentuated the landscape features so distinct to this part of Dane county. We were driving through some of the most productive farms in Wisconsin.

"Look at that Farmall 1066 belch diesel smoke," Tom commented, looking over the top of his ever present state trouser sunglasses. "I'd like to be on the seat of that machine today."

"Forget it, Morris," Calhoun said. "You're a superintendent, not a farmer."

"On days like this, I sort of wish it was the other way around," Tom sighed.

The highway followed a corridor that is rich in natural history and glacial topography. As soon as we'd left Middleton, the road had risen up and out of the flat lakebed of old glacial Lake Middleton. It was a prominent

feature that was easy to see, if you were aware of it and looked for it. It was left as the glaciers melted and retreated to the northeast around 12,000 years ago.

Modern day commuters gripe and complain about Highway 12—"it's crooked, it dips up and down too much, and it takes too long to get from Sauk City to Madison," they complain.

"It is too bad they didn't have Jim Love as an instructor," Bogey said. "He loved geology, understood its natural connection to the soil, and made sure we understood it, too. Because of him I can really enjoy this trip."

"I suppose you will want to stop and look for agates, too!" Ed said with a big smile on his face.

Morris wasn't ever in much of a hurry, and at times that was aggravating. Not today. There was too much natural beauty to soak up. We had all afternoon to get there and look around the Cobble Valley course. There was no need to rush.

The reason the road rose and dipped and curved is that it follows the contours of the landforms left by the glacier—drumlins and kettles and recessional moraines. That is also why it is so pretty.

The drumlin hills are still mostly wooded—too steep for any farming or even decent pastures for the herds of Brown Swiss and Guernsey and Holsteins we saw along the way. Rather, such hilly countryside is ideal for wildlife—rabbits and fox and deer and other small mammals. And songbirds. Bogey pointed out the passenger side window—"look at the hawk circling up there." Nobody said anything, satisfied with just enjoying a small wonder of nature so close to our home.

A few miles north we descended into a large valley that marked the edge of the Johnston Moraine, a ridge of soil and rock that marks the western terminus of the Wisconsin glacier. One time, centuries ago, it was filled with water melting from the face of the glacier. The highway followed the valley to where it joined the Wisconsin River Valley at Sauk City and Prairie du Sac.

Early settlers, almost immediately after their arrival, built great and beautiful rural churches. We all loved the sight of the spires of the churches in Ashton and in Roxbury reaching for the sky. Those old Germans were craftsmen like we seldom see anymore.

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As we crossed the bridge over the Wisconsin River I said to Tom "pull into the Celo Bottling Co. parking lot and I'll buy us each a cream soda. Maybe we will be lucky and see some bald eagles."

It was a lucky day for us. We saw a number of the big birds—enormous birds, really—as they flew rapidly along the water surface or perched, almost hunched over, in trees, and spiraling high into the spring sky before diving to the water. "Wish I had binoculars," Steady Eddie said.

"Saddle up, men, let's go," Tom ordered. Out of Sauk City, the road headed almost straight north through sandy soils deposited over the centuries. Wooded sandstone bluffs followed us along the left or west. Ahead, the south range of the Baraboo Hills was visible miles before we got there. These hills are the weathered remains of mountains that were once part of the landscape here.

The highway climbed up into the south range, cutting through the ancient pink quartzite that they are

made of. They're 1.2 billion years old, older than any others in the state, and the quartzite deposit is famous to rock hounds all over the country. The park at Devil's Lake is as popular as any park the state operates.

So far, the trip had been leisurely and restorative. And we were getting close to our destination near Hometown. We turned northwest out of Baraboo and the last miles to Cobble Valley went quickly. The guys were quiet and reflective; that included me. "This would have been a nice trip in the fall, when we are exhausted from the long season," Bogey observed.

"There's nothing to stop you from following in our exact tracks come September," Tom offered.

We drove through Hometown, slowly, to enjoy this scenic town that was so well preserved, probably because it is off the beaten path. Clearly it was prosperous and was known for the many generations of Scots who were born, raised, worked and died here. It was easy to see why.

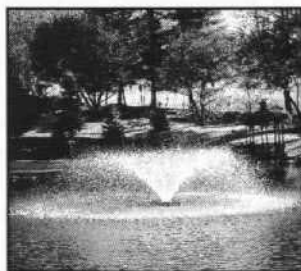
The course is on the edge of town.

It is not a pretentious place. Rather, it is well cared for, neat and tidy and somewhat secluded. The clubhouse is some distance from the main road, although you can see it from there. We pulled into the full parking lot, found a place big enough for Tom's Explorer and parked.

There was only a slight breeze in the air this sunny afternoon. The flag was flying over the peak at the entrance of the clubhouse, and the warm weather had brought out the patio furniture. The awning fringe on the big veranda fluttered, and a number of our friends were gathered there. We could hear an occasional "rivot" from a frog, somewhere in the stream that ran along the right side of the 18th hole.

The clubhouse is a classic, suitable for a classic golf course like this one. It hadn't been added to in its entire history, going back to the earliest days of golf in Wisconsin, probably around the time of 1900. But time didn't date it; its architecture was more than appropriate for these days. The two story building had formidable limestone

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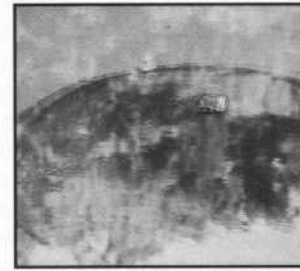
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chimneys on each end. They were out of necessity large chimneys—the house had a fireplace on each end of both floors—four in total. It had touches unaffordable today—leaded windows, elaborate and intricate trim outside and native Wisconsin hardwoods inside. It was the mansion of the Hepstead estate before it became the Cobble Valley house.

Mac greeted us at the receptionist's desk where we were making sure our registration for the meeting had arrived.

"Glad to see you guys could make it to Cobble Valley," he said with a smile as he tamped the tobacco in his pipe and lit it. Mac was the third generation to run the CVCC golf course. His grandfather had built it under the close attention and scrutiny of Tillinghast himself. "Gramps always called him Tillie," Mac said as we visited about Cobble Valley.

"Dad spent his entire life here, and assumed the reins from Gramps just before WWII, although Gramps ran the place again while Dad served in the Army in Europe during the war. Dad came home in 1945 and stayed until 1975 when he retired and I was given his position. He still mows fairways for me and promised he'd join us for dinner."

Mac lit his pipe again, drew a few puffs and continued. "The MacPhersons are three generations at Cobble Valley, but so are many of our members. The Marshes, the Donaldsons, the Blodgetts, the Graves', the Pringles', the Tuckers and the Bliss' all have three generations. There are dozens of more families who have enjoyed Cobble Valley continuously for going on a hundred years.

"Tradition counts for lots here, " Mac went on without any coaching from us. "The clubhouse, as you can see, has not had its original character altered. We have kept the infrastructure sound, but the appearance is timeless. Tillinghast would immediately recognize it if he were to show up today."

"And the golf course is the same. We have not found a need to redesign or remodel the golf holes to suit the game as it is played today with the implements the players use. It has, simply put, stood the test of time. Tillinghast had a great love for Cobble Valley and we have all his original detailed plans. Over the decades we have done modest reshaping to keep it true to his original course.

"Nobody compares Cobble Valley to Winged Foot or Baltusrol or San Francisco Golf Club. But we are almost thankful for that. Members here simply love golf and this golf course and like being left alone. Fame would spoil Cobble Valley.

"You guys would be shocked at how modest our budget is. Their love of the game and of this course do not require some of the extremes other clubs enjoy in conditioning.

"We have no tennis, no swimming, and only a very few golf cars, pretty much for those unable to walk and play anymore. The tradition of caddies is still strong."

The guys were nearly all in from the golf course, prompting Tom Morris to ask Mac if we could get a couple of those cars for a quick ride on the golf course. "Sure," Mac said. "I'll lead you on an abbreviated tour."

We grabbed scorecards, climbed into the electric golf cars and followed Mac. It was already getting cool, and the quiet of the rural countryside was comforting. Hole by hole Mac led us, stopping when something he knew would be of interest to golf course superintendents came up.

It was a true organic golf course. The land had been a great canvas for Tillinghast and little soil had been moved. His job, as Geoffrey Cornish always says, was to take the time and find the holes that were already in the landscape. AWT had succeeded.

Finally, we had reached the 18th, the "home" hole at CVCC. I had heard about this hole, a difficult, uphill par four. The distinguishing feature wasn't bunkering or length or even the uphill nature of it.

Rather it was the old spring house the hole played around. It was run down—had been for years, according to Mac—and all that remained were crumbling, vine-covered limestone

walls. Nature had been allowed by Mac, on order from CVCC players, to take over the area. Obviously, since it was a spring house, a small stream flowed next to it. The spring house forced the home hole into a dogleg right, one of those holes Tillinghast had merely "discovered".

"Many tournaments have been won and lost on this hole," Mac said. "Some of those matches are legendary in CVCC history."

We parked the cars outside the pro shop and joined our colleagues — friends, really—in the clubhouse. "Better hurry," Mac said. "Dinner will be served before long."

The crowd gathered at Cobble Valley was ebullient. So was I. The meal we shared was excellent and the Club Captain—Mr. Donaldson—gave us a warm welcome. Jim Marsh, the chairman of the green committee, gave a great lecture to our WGCSA members about the history of Cobble Valley. Not a person moved the whole time he was talking.

And all too soon it was time to go home. In all my years I have never enjoyed a meeting more. The ride up through the Wisconsin landscape, the closeness of nature, and the company of friends were moments one should live for. The hours at Cobble Valley spoke volumes about the greatness of a great game, its history and designers and players and tournaments and, most of all, the venues.

The ride home was quiet. Oh, we were talking, but softly. All four of us were reflective and happy, secretly hoping we'd feel the same at the end of August. I was pretty sure we would.

The night was clear, the stars twinkled and the air was cool as we got out of the truck at Stinky's. Bogey sighed and said, "What a great way to spend a career." On this night, we all agreed. 🍷

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