

O.J. WOULDN'T RECOGNIZE THE PLACE!

By Monroe S. Miller

The May/June 1986 issue of *THE GRASS ROOTS* had what I thought was a great story by Jim Spindler. As part of our *Made In Wisconsin* series, Jim put together the history of Milorganite and the people involved since its beginning in March of 1926.

My last tour of the Milorganite plant was inspired by that series ten years ago. Although Milorganite hasn't changed in 70 years, the Jones Island facility is, for all practical purposes, brand new. I didn't recognize Jones Island or the plant; I'd guess O.J. Noer, if he were to come back today, wouldn't either.

The changes have been massive and impressive. On that last visit I got there by boat. Today a four lane divided highway practically takes you to the front door. The facility in 1986 — from the office to the dryer building — was unchanged from 1926. Today, those buildings are all gone. The red brick buildings have given way to a thoroughly modern look. All that remains is the towering brick smokestack that has been prominent in the Milwaukee skyline for so long.

I wasn't prepared for the Anniversary Tour. No one had warned me of the extent of the revamping of the entire MMSD system. Little did I know that a good deal of the change is underground. Huge tunnels were built to provide enormous storage capacity for the system, eliminating the need to ever run excess into Lake Michigan.

When you stop to think about it, even the staff changes have been 100% now. I never knew O.J., but Charlie Wilson, Jim Latham and Bob Welch were synonymous with Milorganite for most of my career. They are all now retired. The new crew of Terry Ward, Al Nees, Larry Lennert, Tisa Overman, Kent Coburn and Jan Vogt is talented and carrying on the tradition of this pioneering effort in environmentalism and turf-grass nutrition.

This is a Wisconsin idea and company, through and through. MMSD was the first large scale activated sludge treatment plant in the world. It was so innovative and so ahead of its time that the American Society of Civil Engineering named it a "National Historic Engineering Site" in 1974.

At its beginning MMSD had enough sense to know that the solids resulting from this one-of-a-kind treatment plant would require enormous landfill area. So they went where common sense would dictate — the College of Agriculture at the State Land Grant University in Madison. Professor Emil Truog, a world renown soil scientist, directed a fellowship to study the use of activated sludge as a fertilizer. Truog chose one of his graduate students to do the study — a Norwegian farm kid from Stoughton named Oyvind Jual Noer.

(Continued on page 14)



That's Dr. Wayne Kussow in the center, with Chris Kerkman and Larry Lennert. Both Kerkman and Lennert earned their M.S. degree under Kussow. They are at the NOER Research Facility, looking at Milorganite plots.



Massive storage bins, part of the new Milorganite facility, hold millions of pounds of America's favorite natural organic fertilizer.



The Milwaukee skyline from a top the concrete storage bins at MMSD on Jones Island.



Milorganite even has its own train! The bulk product is hauled to a separate bagging facility west of the city.

(Continued from page 13)

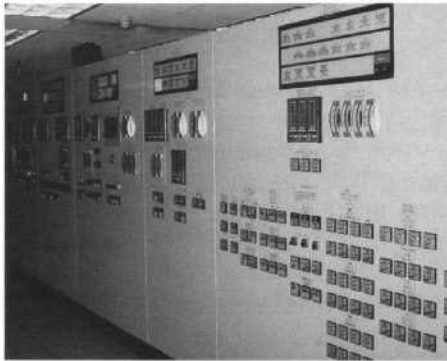
Noer determined sludge analysis, experimented with its use on field and vegetable crops and tried it on lawns. In all cases, it outperformed fertilizer materials available at the time.

Golf courses were another obvious use of the Milwaukee sludge. It pleases me no end knowing that his first plots were at Blackhawk Country Club where I have labored for 24 years. He also set up research at Maple Bluff CC in Madison. Other work was done at Blue Mound CC, Ozaukee CC and Milwaukee CC. The results at all locations were superb. This led Noer to take his research to golf courses all over the country. Word got out about this "new" organic fertilizer and the rest is, as they say, history. Wisconsin history.

I think, for me anyway, that was what the Anniversary Tour at Milorganite had for a message. Times change, years pass, the facility changes and grows and improves, the people change. But the product remains what it was on August 1, 1926 — a world class, environmentally sound, high quality turfgrass fertilizer. And it is made right here at home. 🍷



Control central for the MMSD facility.



Computers run much of operation on Jones Island.



A "civil engineering wonder" — the MMSD plant that produces Milorganite.

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