



## Romey Orth's Wisconsin Golf Course Museum

By Monroe S. Miller

Whenever anyone asked Vroman Orth what he did, he always replied, "I collect." Then he would quickly add, "and I manage a golf course for a living."

Romey (hardly anyone knew him by his birth name Vroman) was a quiet man who had been around golf courses all of his life, learning from his father Fritz. He even took Fritz's place at the Covered Bridge Country Club after Fritz suffered a heart attack on the golf course and passed away. His ashes were scattered on the hill leading down to the covered bridge in the middle of the golf course. Romey always said, "that's the way I want to leave this earth," not an uncommon thought among golf course superintendents.

Southeast and south central Wisconsin was home to Romey his entire life. He spent a few years at CBCC, and each subsequent step of

his career took him to a better course and club. When he retired he had spent a long time at the Eastbourne CC, one of the state's premier clubs.

The more than five decades he'd been around and on golf courses gave him endless, almost infinite opportunities to practice his collecting. Everyone, and I mean everyone, knew they did not dare throw anything away from their shop unless they asked Romey first. Trips to a junkyard with a load of scrap iron were preceded by a call to him to see if he wanted any of it. Usually he'd say, "I'd better come and look." And then he would.

Turf equipment dealers and distributors in Wisconsin and the states around all knew Romey Orth. He was well appraised of what they had sitting on their used equipment lot and over the course of many years he acquired worn out iron for the cost of hauling it away.

Although no one ever pushed hard to find out what he did with his treasures, once in awhile somebody would ask, "Romey, what in the hell are you going to do with all that junk?"

"Someday you'll see," Romey replied. "Just be patient."

He had a small farm—forty acres—a few miles outside of Eastbourne. It was situated neatly on a hilltop at the edge of an oak savannah and had been a prosperous dairy farm until it was sold off in pieces as an older farmer and his wife retired. Romey bought the last forty acres, which included the buildings.

The house was a classic farm house—several chimneys, a large wrap around porch that offered a great place to sit in the big swing on summer evenings. The dairy barn was large and had stanchions for thirty-six cows. The calf pens, horse stalls and the stanchions for the yearling heifers occupied as much room

as the milking section. Two large silos were centered on the west side of the barn, and there was a large stylish cupola on the center ridge of the roof.

The farmstead also had a combination hoghouse on the exposed ground floor and a chicken coop above, at the ground level on the other side. The ensemble of buildings also included a large corncrib, a grand machine shed, a beautiful stone spring house and a granary.

It was an immaculate homestead, just as one would expect considering the way Romey ran the Eastbourne golf course.

All of the Orth boys worked for their dad during their youth, just as Romey had worked for Fritz. As they went off to college and settled in on a campus, they immediately lined up a golf course job. One of them spent years at my course, more years than I can remember. When he left he had earned a PhD in history, one of the premier departments on the Madison campus.

It seemed odd, at graduation, that Jimmy Orth was now Dr. James V. Orth. Jimmy was one of the lucky ones—the day after he received his degree he went to work for the Wisconsin State Historical Society.

Jim, and all the boys for that matter, spent a lot of time at the home farm. It was a close family and at those rare times when I'd wonder what they did with their time on the farm, I figured it was just to visit with their parents and help out with the inevitable chores that come with owning a piece of land. Once Romey retired it seemed they made the trips to Eastbourne even more frequently.

I would see Jim pretty often, usually because he'd stop for a cup of coffee on his way to the State Street building where he worked. "A guy gets addicted to this stuff working on a golf course," he'd tell us with a

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laugh. If I was busy, he would take a cart for a quick spin around the golf course.

One day I came right out and asked Jimmy, "what are you and your brothers and your dad up to out there, anyway?"

His face flushed and I knew he was hiding something. "I can't spoil Dad's surprise, so don't ask about it, please. I promise you will know by next spring. It will all make sense by then. Actually, we are all surprised you haven't asked more questions before this."

I didn't stop wondering, but I did as Jim requested; I didn't ask him anymore nosy questions. Patience was in order.

And, lo and behold, Jim was right. Romey, although retired, stayed active in the WGCSA and volunteered his farm for the first monthly meeting in the spring of the next year. The guys were a little hesitant at first—no golf course at the Orth place (as far as any of us knew)—but out of respect and trust, they agreed.

The meeting notices went out; the meeting was promoted as one "you won't want to miss. Romey promises it will be unforgettable. Lunch at noon and educational session at 1:30 p.m. Entertainment at 2:30 p.m. Pig roast at 5:00 p.m."

A group of us got together for the ride to Romey's—Tom Morris, Scott Fennimore, Bogey Calhoun, Steady Eddie Middleton and me. The conversation for the entire trip east for

the meeting centered around speculation about the nature of the meeting. It was Calhoun who said, "Romey is probably going to put a hundred guys to work fixing up that junk he has collected for 50 years."

Bogey wasn't far from the mark. About a mile before we were supposed to turn left from the state highway onto Dairy Ridge Road, there was a billboard on the right side of the road that announced VISIT THE WORLD'S ONLY GOLF COURSE MUSEUM- Next left, then two miles.

It was dead silent in the Explorer. We all stared at the sign at the same time, read it and looked around at one another. Finally, Tom broke the silence. "For once you were right Calhoun. That old rascal did fix up all that junk he's scavenged his entire life, some of it before we were born!"

The entrance to the Wisconsin Golf Course Museum was several hundred yards before the entrance to Romey's farm. It was new asphalt, wide and jet black in the warm Wisconsin sun. A cedar sign announced that we were on Magnolia Lane. The road made a big sweeping arc from the entrance toward the building. The parking lot was new and big and beautifully landscaped and occupied the front and both sides of the building. The first thing you see was a new building—brick faced with white columns at its entrance. It was removed from the house where Romey lived and the rest of the farm buildings. A generous, immaculate lawn area fronted the building.

The Orth boys were parking cars and getting people to the big red and white tent that had been put up on the lawn. Jimmy Orth smiled when he saw me, and as I rolled down the window he said, "see why I didn't want you asking me any questions?!"

"I get it, now," I replied as we shook hands through the window.

Guys from all over Wisconsin were there for the meeting. A huge nylon banner that fluttered in the breeze announced 'The Grand Opening of the Wisconsin Golf Course Museum.' The talk was about golf course conditions—we always talk about that—and plans for the year. But mostly, we wondered what was behind the doors of this stunning new building in the rolling and lush Wisconsin landscape.

White posts had been set in sand pails on either side of the entrance to the new and formidable building. It was obvious we were there for a ribbon cutting ceremony.

The meal was served—brats, sauerkraut, baked beans (a Calhoun favorite; it would be a brutal ride home), cheese, milk and coffee and a big bowl of ice cream for dessert—and as guys finished eating, they started to nose around the new building.

"The thing is enormous!" Calhoun gushed. "I wish my shop was this big."

"Get back here, you guys," Romey scolded. "Morris, give me a hand in keeping these characters corralled." Tom smiled and said, "Count on it, Romey."

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A small podium had been set up and a loud speaker system was given a test by Jimmy Orth. "Testing. Testing. OK, Dad, Let's do it!"

Romey worked his way through his friends and colleagues. He knew them all and they were patting him on the back, cheering him along. The old man was grinning, and his rugged weathered face had happiness written all over it.

He made it to the front, took the mike from Jim, and slowly looked over the crowd as if to savor the moment. The only other sound was from the birds in this beautiful and quiet corner of Wisconsin. The banner fluttered lightly in the gentle breeze. The guys were, unbelievably, silent. Romey cleared his voice and started.

"I'm glad you boys all came today. And I thank God for such a wonderful day. I am a very happy man; finally I can show you what has been a fifty year labor of love for me and the rest of the family."

He paused, then started again, looking at Jim, then Betty and the rest of the family.

"As I think about it, most of you in the audience have a piece of this museum. I cannot think of any Wisconsin superintendent who hasn't, at one time or another, brought me some relic or antique related to golf courses. Today I want to share with you first—my good and faithful friends—and then with the whole world, some of the rich history of golf course management and greenkeeping in Wisconsin. It would be the same almost anywhere else in the country. I hope word gets around and we have visitors from everywhere golf is played.

"What you are going to see as you roam around the museum my family and I have worked on so long are things that we hope will bring back special memories in your working lives, remind you of special moments of your career and bring to you an awareness of what has gone on before your time. The collection is preserved for all time, for any who

want to see and touch and remember what was before us, how work was when we were young or when our ancestors were young.

"This museum will, I hope, be used to measure our progress as the years continue to go by. The highest compliment for me would be for others in other states to follow this example and start other golf course museums.

"Golf course management has been a wonderful career for me, as it was for my father and will be for at least some of my children. It was a fun way to spend my life. I love it deeply, just as my father before me loved it.

"Enjoy yourself today as you wander up and down the aisles of time. Thank you for spending this great day with me."

And with that Romey stepped down, took the scissors from Jim and cut the white ribbon. I snapped a picture. The Wisconsin Golf Course Museum was now officially open!

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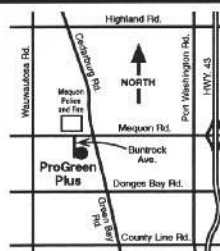
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