



A GOOD RETIREMENT

By Monroe S. Miller

"Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we ask you to bless the golf course superintendents who have gathered here tonight to honor their colleague and my dear brother, Jack Whittier, at his retirement. He, like them, is a survivor in a truly challenging profession. Working for 300 people who honestly believe they know more about growing grass than he does takes a stalwart and patient person; we thank you, Father, for that patience and strength.

"Golf course superintendents must deal successfully with club members ranging from the overbearing affluent to the unreasonable nouveau rich. We thank you, Dear Lord, that most golf players are not at these extremes.

"Bless you for giving them the sense to appreciate a beautiful sunrise as much as a paycheck, for the love of land and plants, and for their worship of you.

"Pour forth upon them, O Lord, your wisdom to guide them; more of your patience to retain their sanity during the golf season; your humility to help them keep their sense of humor.

"Make them cheerful in the awareness that they are not God; more importantly, neither are those whom they serve.

"Give them, O Lord, a mind to know you. Make their lives pleasing to you and may they persevere in their trust as they await you. Amen."

We repeated "amen" after Pastor Bill Whittier and sat down at our tables in the dining room at the Pheasant Branch Country Club.

The clubhouse was packed; it was the place to be that night if you were a golf course superintendent in Wisconsin. The dean of our association was retiring and we were about the last group to extend our honor and respect and celebrate this time of his life.

I looked around the dining room and was impressed. It was a stag group, but out of deeply held respect for our honoree, everyone was dressed in a coat and tie. You would never guess this was the same group that would be rolling dice, playing cards and sipping Gordon's after a summer golf meeting.

Bogey Calhoun pulled at the top button of his dress shirt, obviously in discomfort and hoping to stretch the collar a little for some relief. But he resisted loosening his necktie.

"I'm telling you guys, we should have held this at The Machine Shed Restaurant; we could have dressed for comfort," Bogey whined as he looked around for some agreement.

"Or you could lose twenty pounds so your clothes would fit," retorted Tom Morris with some irritation in his voice.

"You complain enough for six people, Calhoun," Tom said.

Jack Whittier was a classic golf course superintendent, a profession he was proud to have been active in for over 40 years. At a time when few did, he started his career in the 1950s with a degree in Soil Science from the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

He spent summers on Madison area golf courses, and when he graduated he was immediately hired by the Caves Hollow Golf Club west of Madison about 50 miles. His summers' experiences held him in good stead, as did his superb education from the university. He had an immediate and positive impact on the Caves Hollow golf course.

Students graduating these days, even those with a four year degree, are dumbfounded; they cannot believe someone was a superintendent at a quality golf course at the age of 22. Nowadays, a B.S. degree and three or four summers on a golf course staff gets a new graduate an



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interview for a second assistant position, spray technician or foreman. As Jack always says, "times have really changed."

When questioned, he always gives them some sense of relief and lots of encouragement. "Remember," he'd say, "when I started at Caves Hollow we had a Ford 8N tractor, a Ford 640 Workmaster tractor, and an IH 240 front end loader. Pull frame gang mowers were used to cut fairways at an inch and a quarter three times a week, Worthington airfield blitizers were all we cut roughs with, and there wasn't such a thing as a triplex greensmower.

"We cut greens at a quarter of an inch, tees at three quarters of an inch and we raked bunkers once a week by hand. One of the most important jobs was watering—it was done manually with hoses and roller base sprinklers for greens and tees, and quick couplers were used for fairway irrigation. I was lucky we even had watered fairways—most courses in the state when I started were unwatered.

"Clover was a bigger problem than any disease, and we never had a total operating budget over \$50,000 during the years I worked for the wonderful people at Caves Hollow."

He stayed at Caves Hollow for five years, and like everyone else his age in those times he was drafted into the Army during the early stages of the Vietnam War. His duty station was an outpost some 40 miles west of Da Nang. There weren't many GIs in the country at that time, and he crossed the Pacific on a troop carrier ship. It was several years later when soldiers were shuttled there and home by aircraft.

Jack learned lots about sacrifice and duty and honor while he was in southeast Asia. He returned home a hero, though few knew of it. Not many outside of his family knew

he came home with a Purple Heart, either. And he told no one. "I only did what I was expected to do," he explained to me once.

Although his career had been interrupted by military service, he wasn't home long before he was hired to manage the golf course at Pheasant Branch Country Club.

"I have always known a good thing when I see it, and I knew that Pheasant Branch was going to be a great place to spend some time," Jack said. "I guess I didn't think I'd spend this much time, however!"

Pheasant Branch was one of Wisconsin's venerable old line country clubs. Although far from the wealthiest, it was unarguably the best run. Jack was a part, a big part, of the team that accounted for its efficient operation.

"Don't kid yourself," we've all heard him say, "and think that in the 35 years I have been here I have always seen eye to eye with all the club presidents. Remember, the term here is one year, so I have dealt with some difficult men and women who have held the presidency. But the club has a stable committee chair system and all eight of the green committee chairs have been truly wonderful."

The staff at Pheasant Branch worked quietly and served us an excellent meal, one fit for a group of Wisconsin golf course superintendents. There wasn't any fish or chicken to be seen, only beef! The vegetables were well cooked and the baked potatoes were so large we knew they came from the central sands potato country.

We had the club to ourselves. Since the PBCC had already had a reception and dinner to honor the Whittiers, they felt it appropriate to let Jack "be himself" with his long-time colleagues and friends.

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The members had made it clear how much they respected Jack; it went beyond the party. He was presented with a lifetime membership at the club, free from the burden of dues or assessments. We were all inspired. But that paled, to us at least, when the green committee chair presented Jack with the keys to a brand new, bright red, four-wheel drive, three-quarter ton Ford pickup! Jack was stunned, but very, very happy.

Jack was rare, almost singular, in our business these days and, in fact, has been for almost a decade. At a WGCSA meeting, he would always be the oldest member there, usually by quite a number of years. "It's been that way for a long time," he'd tell us.

"What do you guys expect?" Jack would ask. "Stats show only 2% of us are over 60 and only 5% are over 50. It is no wonder I seem to have been the oldest at meetings for long—I have been!"

We talked about it a lot, among ourselves,—Calhoun, Morris, Fennimore, Middleton and all the rest of the guys.

"Where does everyone go once they reach 45?" is the question we all wonder. It seems that before hitting the magic FIFTY, they all find something else to do for a living. We think they are stressed out and realize the impossibility of ever attaining the perfection either they or the players want. The job doesn't get easier with age, either, and as you grow older the intensity of the routine gets old, too.

Jack was unusual in another way—the length of his term of service to one organization. It is unheard of anymore. The culture of America these days seems to say "five years is enough at any one place" and people move all over in their career.

"I wouldn't do it any other way," he has said frequently. He has nearly 50 former employees who manage golf courses, and many more are in other positions in the profession. It was easier for him to do that while at one place. There was competition among young people to work for him. He even had the chance to train his sons—both are Wisconsin grads who followed in his footsteps for a career.

It was a great evening, celebrating a great guy, who, because of his personality and wide range of interests, was heading for what we knew would be a great retirement. We were all happy for this rare person in golf.

And maybe a little—just a little—jealous. ♣

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