



Romey Orth's Wisconsin Olde Tyme Mowing Contest

By Monroe S. Miller

"Geez, there are a lot of guys here," Bogey Calhoun said as he got out of Tom Morris' Ford truck, stretched and pulled up his pants.

"And you shouldn't be one of them," Tom came back, "unless you are going to watch. You must not have much pride, Calhoun. Any one of my kids could out mow you, even the ones who've never worked at Maple Leaf CC."

I looked around as I got out of T.M.'s truck and was surprised to see the parking lot full, almost to overflowing. "There ARE a lot of people here," I mused to no one in particular.

The big crowd had come to the Wisconsin Golf Course Museum in southeast Wisconsin for another Romey Orth dream-come-true - a mowing contest. "I'll do all the work, men," Romey said at the WGCSA spring business meeting and sprung the idea on all of us. "All you have to do is practice up all summer, come to the Museum and compete."

Of course, as much as we all love Romey, no one objected. Some were curious, some were ambivalent, and most were excited even though they didn't have many details. What we knew was that if Romey was in charge, it would be a good event.

Now, none of us had ever heard of a mowing contest, not even the old-timers. I knew, as a youth, neighbors and relatives talked about plowing contests, usually held in the autumn. They were sponsored by agricultural societies or maybe Farm Progress Days or county ag boards. In fact, even today you can compete in the National Plowing Contest.

But a mowing contest? Leave it to Romey Orth to come up with an idea like this to generate interest among course superintendents and build on the camaraderie we already have. And the publicity value had great potential.

Like he had so often for special events at the Wisconsin Golf Course Museum, Romey had the big red and white tent set up on the lawn of the museum. He was holding court with Betty and son Jim at the registration table. I could see Scott Fennimore and Steady Eddie Middleton visiting, with their index fingers hooked around the handle of a Case/IH coffee cup.

"Which events are you guys signed up for?" Romey asked as we looked over the contest categories. Morris and I were smart enough to lay back, see what this was all about

and maybe enter next year. Not Calhoun.

"Get me in all of them, Romey!" Calhoun said loud enough for scores to hear. "I'll win something for sure that way!"

Tom looked at his young and brash colleague and friend with some disgust. "Calhoun," he started slowly, "by the time this is over you'll be known as Bozo Calhoun."

Calhoun only smiled, enjoying the knowledge he was under Morris' skin, like he so often was. "What's the matter, Tom, no self-confidence?"

Tom grunted and then ignored

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Calhoun, knowing there was no use in trying to humiliate Bogey.

Banners were hung on the outside walls of the museum; they announced the principal sponsors — Toro, Jacobsen, John Deere and Ransomes. One of the tables in the tent was loaded with trophies, big and beautiful trophies. Romey clearly wanted to generate lots of interest and there were plenty of guys drooling over the trophy table. "Wait until you hear about the prizes," Romey offered as even more enticement of enter. "You won't believe them, especially the Grand Champion's prize."

A large board under the tent listed all the events. It was divided into large area mowing equipment and small area mowing equipment.

The large area categories included the following pieces:

- Jacobsen 9-gang pull frames towed by a Ford 641 Workmaster tractor powered by a 134 cubic inch Tiger engine. The hood, fenders and engine were all painted red and accented with a gray grill gray wheel rims. The driver was protected from the sun with an unique black canopy, but he didn't have the advantage of power steering. This would make the maneuvering particularly difficult in the contest.
- Toro 7-gang single point adjustment tow behind mowers, pulled by a 1958 Case 211GP triple-range tractor with a wide front end and a two-tone paint color combination of Desert Sunset and Flambeau Red. The pair made a beautiful mowing rig.
- Ransome 7-gang pull behind mowers towed by a John Deere B with a modified wide front end, suitable for steep grade changes found on some golf courses.
- Worthington F-6 tractor with mounted mowers (cable hoist) and rear wheel steering.
- Worthington Airfield Blitzers with 5-blade reels. This unit was assembled as a 7-gang also, but with four cutting units in front and three trailing them. It was hitched to a 1946 Oliver Model 60 with a narrow front.
- A 1957 Allis-Chalmers D-14 featuring a Power Director hand clutch with high and low ranges, a 149 cu-in. (35 h.p.) Power Crater engine, traction booster system and a roll shift front axle; the Wisconsin manufactured tractor was hitched to a Roseman hydra-gang fairway mowing unit.
- A 1939 Allis-Chalmers C with a six

foot PTO driven sickle mower. The Allis had a narrow front also.

- McCormick Deering Farmall B (1947) with a belly hung 70" rotary mower. This rig had a wide front end.

There was a lot of conversation around the board; the older guys were interested in the different kinds of big equipment, clearly familiar with most of the pieces from years of use when they were contemporary to the golf course management scene.

Bogey Calhoun typified the

younger crowd. "What's a Roseman?" he asked Morris quietly, not wanting to expose his ignorance. "Nobody ever really used that sickle mower or the Farmall rotary, did they, Tom?"

Morris just smiled.

The small area machinery list was almost as interesting as the big equipment list. And some of the pieces were just as unfamiliar. Included in the competition were:

- Jacobsen 321 walking greensmower
- Toro Series IV walking greens mower.

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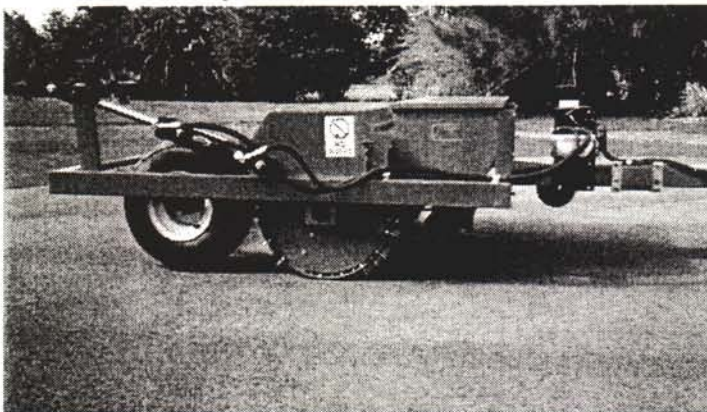
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- Ransomes Auto Certes walking greensmower.
- Toro Series V walking greensmower (also known as the "thatchmaker").
- Jacobsen 4-acre mower.
- Toro 36" Whirlwind mower with sulky (required for this competition)
- National 84" triplex

Romey took the microphone and announced that lunch was to be served before the mowing began. The crowd quickly formed a line, looking forward to the kind of feast found at events like this one, a Field Day at the Noer farm or Farm Progress Days. You know — bratwurst, hamburgers, German potato salad, baked beans, pickles, and more. "Heart attack on a plate," noted Tom Morris as he loaded his plate full, just like everybody else.

"That may be, Tom," I said, "but this is Wisconsin and this menu is what we love. There won't be many leftovers."

We were past the subtle hints of change in the seasons. The zinnia beds at the entrance to the museum were loaded with old fashioned colors in the flowers and the leaves were dusty with powdery mildew.

There was a haze on the hilltops beyond the museum, and the crabapple trees were loaded with red fruits. The roadsides, unmowed these days, were filled with golden rods and asters, milk weed and Queen Anne's lace, black-eyed Susan and thistles, all offering those shades of color we associate with the fall season.

This is a more unhurried time of year for Wisconsin's golf course superintendents. Tournaments are over, kids are in school instead of at the practice range and golf course, and players have remembered how much they love football played by the Packers and the Badgers and their

local high school team. We are back in charge, aerifying, doing project work, and attending this Wisconsin Olde Tyme Mowing Contest.

Romey was at the microphone immediately after lunch. He got everyone's attention, led us all in the pledge of allegiance to the flag, a 10' X 15' version which fluttered lightly in the breeze atop the huge aluminum pole at the museum entrance. "We would have sang the national anthem," Romey explained, "but I couldn't line up a band!"

The simple act of citing the pledge amplified the "old fashioned" aspect of Romey's new event.

"Now let me introduce you to our judges," Romey boomed over the loud speaker system. His voice traveled clearly for hundreds of rods. I looked at Tom Morris and we both wondered who would score the events and determine winners.

"Dr. James R. Love, Dr. Gayle L. Worf, Dr. Robert C. Newman, and Dr. Charles F. Koval will score all events in the subjective categories — quality of cut, aesthetics, visuals, etc. Professors Kussow, Stier and Maxwell will handle measurements of time, distance, area, clipping weights and all other objective categories.

A cheer went up from the crowd; we all knew the best mowers would win with a sterling crew of judges like this one. Who in the world would argue with any of the four retired pros? And who can argue with measurements? It was brilliant planning by Romey. Plus, it was the first time in years, maybe ever, that the past and current turf faculty from the UW were gathered in the same place at the same time.

"How cool!" Steady Eddie Middleton gushed.

"Listen up, gentlemen," Romey

continued. "The criteria for each contest are listed at that area of the museum grounds where it will take place. Read carefully and understand. The judges' decisions are final. If there is a tie, we have a provision for a mow off to determine a winner. And it will not be drawing the highest number from a golf hat!"

The place was a beehive of activity. Each event had a manager who explained the rules. The judges split up and went to their assigned events, scoring pads and pencils and tapes and scales and prisms in hand. Hand held bullhorns called competitors when their turn came. It was a colorful, busy and exciting scene. Out of the corner of my eye I happened to catch movement on the roof of the museum. I looked up and there was Romey, camera in hand, shooting pictures like crazy! A video camera on a tripod was catching the action in real speed.

And it was fun. Each mower was out of any kind of adjustment before each competition; part of winning was properly setting it up — height, reel to bedknife adjustment, etc. The older members were serious; Frank Mueller was lying on his side, carefully bringing the bedknife and reel into adjustment on the Airfield Blitzers, slowly turning the reel and listening for the right metal on metal sound.

Joe Stephens even went so far as to check the oil in the Ford 641 Workmaster tractor before starting it and pulling the 9-gang Jakes onto the field of competition. Both Joe and Frankie were long retired WGCSA members, but the mowing contest had them talking and grinning the whole day.

The same was true for Buddy Meyer and Kick Logan, Ole Severson and Ben Baxter, Nels Jacobsen and Pat O'Brien. Patty was taking long draws on his pipe while he checked



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out the Series IV Toro. And Nels declared, "I might be the only man here who has cut grass with one of the two cylinder John Deeres."

That doggone Romey designed a tough contest. The big equipment had both straight line tracks to mow and lines with seeping arcs and curves as well as tight turns. It was no field for the faint hearted or the inexperienced.

Mostly, people hesitate when confronted with the unknown; the same was true here. There was a hesitancy, especially among the younger guys after they watched retired men getting right to work. The confidence of the older group was hard to ignore. "After all, " Tom Morris observed, "it is an 'olde tyme' mowing contest and the old-timers know most of this equipment better than the working crowd of today."

But it is also true that a generation or two ago, golf course superintendents were nearly 100% self-sufficient. If a mower needed adjustment or sharpening, they did it. Some were very accomplished mechanics, out of necessity. Today, for a whole host of reasons, many of them are helpless if the course mechanic fails to show for

work. "And they aren't very good operators, either." Frank Mueller chipped in. "Look at Calhoun and Middleton and Fennimore and some of those others. They're lost."

But as the events and hours went along, those very same young guys were right in the thick of it. And Bogey was leading the way, missing plot boundary markers in one place and knocking them over in another. He was a disaster on the 9-gang, couldn't get the F-6 mowers lowered and fell off the sulky on the old Whirlwind.

T.M. loved watching his young friend provide the entertainment for the rest of us. Rather than suffering embarrassment, Bogey was having a great time. "He's got a great sense of humor!" Tom said with admiration in his voice.

"You are running with the big dogs now, Calhoun!" Tom laughed as Bogey took a bite out of an adjacent field with his mower.

The afternoon passed quickly, too quickly, and Romey was offering leftovers to those who were hungry. The first Wisconsin mowing contest was a huge success, and no one was leaving, instead preferring to wait until the last event was over, points tallied and

winners declared. It was a rich experience, one I felt deep in my heart.

Most of us, at one time or another, experience a longing for days gone by, of times past. We suffer great nostalgia and a need to return to where we began. It is a need, maybe, for more fundamental things, for experiencing the satisfaction that comes from depending on one's self. It could be an aching for simpler times and their essentials.

That's impossible, of course. We'd be disappointed and dismayed if it was. But Romey hit a responsive chord with his Wisconsin Olde Tyme Mowing Contest. We'd be back next year, and for all the years to come, looking for that elusive emotion in our lives.

Oh, yes, I almost forgot the prizes. In addition to the big trophies Romey had designed and made to order, there was an embroidered hat for each category winner, and a toy tractor model for each category of towed mowers. And the overall winner received the ultimate prize — a LIFE-TIME pass to the Wisconsin Golf Course Museum, and his portrait on the Wall of Fame! 🌱

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