

# A Trip Through The Ocooch Mountains



By **Monroe S. Miller**, Blackhawk Country Club

We were both ready for a road trip. The unusually early golf course opening, at least early for veteran guys who'd seen a score or more other openings and had a better reference, had both Tom Morris and me in need of some windshield time. No better way to satiate that need than attending the first WGCSA meeting of the season.

I had talked to a lot of the guys at the March spring business meeting. But back then we were all speculating about course conditions and what to expect. Now, we all knew what we had after the winter and were dealing with it, good or bad.

Mostly, from reports I'd been hearing via the admittedly unreliable grapevine, it was a good spring. Everybody was working hard, but the golf players were enjoying the prospect of yet another unusually long Wisconsin golf season. Spirits among Wisconsin's superintendents were pretty high.

As usual, Tom was driving. He had another new vehicle - an "upgrade" he explained over the phone - and wanted to break it in with some country miles. Really, the man just plain likes to drive. And, as I'd learned over a lot of years, the man liked BIG vehicles and new ones. The truck he drove into our shop yard was both - big and new - and in his usual style, it was bright red. Badger Red. The driver had a big smile on his face as he pulled his new Ford Expedition right into the middle bay of our shop. The window rolled down, Tom looked over the top of his trooper shades, and asked if I was ready yet.

"I'll need a step ladder to get into this truck, Tom," I replied with a bit of sarcasm. Actually, I was excited about riding in a vehicle that cost

almost twice as much as my first house in Madison. I noticed that Tom had a couple of fishing poles and some tackle in the back of the third seat.

We took off west. The meeting was in my favorite part of Wisconsin - the southwest corner. The Links at Lynxville overlooked the Mississippi River, or so I had heard, high on the bluffs over the village of Lynxville. Village is a bit of exaggeration for Lynxville; it is more like a wide spot on the road between Prairie du Chien and LaCrosse. It consisted of a gas station, a bait shop, a small grocery store and a handful of houses.

Lynxville is pretty much backwater Wisconsin, known only by fishermen who fished the area. But then the new Links Golf Course was built. It received rave reviews from players and pretty soon some serious numbers of people were making Lynxville a destination. Today there are a few new homes on the golf course, talk of a new motel in Lynxville. Morris and I were anxious to see what all the commotion in western Wisconsin was about.

Nothing does more for my state of mind than fresh air, sunshine and wide open spaces. Those elements

are most often part of the pleasure of managing a golf course, and they were what amplified the anticipation of this trip through the Ocooch Mountains.

The Ocooch Mountains are actually found not only in the southwest of Wisconsin, but northwest Illinois and northeast Iowa as well. The mountains are less the result of a geologic event and more a result of a non-event.

The million years of the ice age produced four successive sheets of ice in north North America. The ice would advance, temperatures would warm and they'd retreat back north. A glacier is like a monumental plow moving across the land, scooping out depressions in the earth, grinding boulders down to pebbles and using them to act like sandpaper on the earth's surface. The ice sheets that affected Wisconsin radiated from two points around Hudson Bay. As a result, a driftless or unglaciated area was left, an area today known as the Ocooch Mountains. It is hilly and steep, beautiful but difficult to farm. Every turn affords a new vista, it seems. The Ocooch area was where the earliest efforts at strip cropping and contour farming took place,



**This State Historical Marker is located in the foothills of the Ocooch Mountains.**

efforts to arrest soil erosion. It is where the first farm in Wisconsin to receive electricity from the Rural Electric Cooperative was located. And it is the place where the first Mastodon skeleton was found, a relic from the cool and wet weather and the spruce forests of 13,000 years ago when the last glacier retreated. Golf courses in the area are beautiful, too, and challenging, but difficult to maintain.

The air was very cool and crisp and very springlike. We staked out a route of backroads that would take us through some small towns and villages - the foothills at Gotham, on to Boaz, Gays Mills, Mt. Sterling, Seneca and then cross country to the Links Golf Course. Apple trees were in bloom and, along with spring wildflowers, dappled the very green landscape. The spire to the Holy Angels Lutheran Church rose through trees to heaven; we spotted it miles away. A little farther down the road was the St. Philomena Catholic Church,

centered among the ancient grave stones of her founders, immigrants no doubt.

We made good time despite the winding roads and lower speed limits, due likely to the nearly total lack of traffic. The entrance to the Links at Lynxville led us to a modest clubhouse sitting on a steep bluff overlooking the Mississippi. It was gorgeous.

The parking lot was full of pickups, a sure sign of a WGCSA meeting. And there were more present that I'd have guessed; apparently a lot of guys had the same hankering that had come over Tom and me. Bogey Calhoun, Scottie Fennimore, Steady Eddie Middleton and the rest of the gang were loosening up and getting ready for the simuttee. Calhoun shouted some insults which Morris ignored and I acknowledged with a wave.

"I like this place," Tom said in his often understated style. "It's nice."

Just then the Links superinten-

dent, Stephen Grass (Honest!) came into view as he worked his way through his colleagues. "Remember, you guys," he admonished, "Dr. Stier is speaking for a short time in 15 minutes. After a quick lunch we'll get started with golf."

Steve took a lot of grief about his name - "you should have been an insurance man or a banker or something other than a golf course superintendent" - was a line he had heard anytime he was among his colleagues. He was teased unmercifully: "What did you name your kids, Steve? Bent? Quack? Rye? Blue?" He actually enjoyed it all.

Professor Stier gave a talk about the research he had planned for the summer and answered questions the guys had. It was a polite and informal meeting, just as these meetings should be. The luncheon was typically Wisconsin - brats, burgers the size of a bread plate, kraut, German potato salad, cheese and dill spears. Nothing fancy; big portions.

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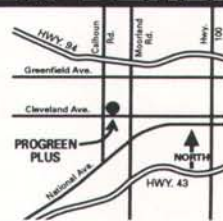
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Morris commandeered Calhoun and Middleton's golf car; they faked outrage as he and I drove off on a self guided tour. We were interested in the water diversion berms, the subtle terracing and the strategically placed holding ponds. Erosion control and runoff elimination were obviously key design elements, as they should be in an area where so much pioneering had been done. The Links at Lynxville was involved in those same good management practices, preserving the land on the beautiful site overlooking the river and the steep, tree-faced bluffs and the valleys below.

We tracked down Steve before we left, shook hands, told him to be careful cutting the "Grass" and started back home to Madison through the Ocooch Mountains. Tom had a different return route planned: "No sense in looking at the same scenery twice in one day," he mused.

We were not far from the course when Tom made the switch to backroads - back backroads. Although the sun was bright and warm and the sky was deep blue, it was still chilly. Morris had his tank of a vehicle going down some steep gravel roads; the saving grace was that he was driving slowly, negating the sharp turns and loose stone of the road.

"You are carrying this scenery thing a little too far, Tom," I said, halfway irritated with his routing plan. "I cannot enjoy the landscape when I'm worried about ending up in a ditch somewhere. Plus, you are going to get lost."

"Quit worrying and quit whining," Tom said sternly. "I know where I am going."

Not five minutes after that we pulled up to a pasture gate. There was a drop off on either side, the flanged end of a culvert on each side, and fairly tall and dry mixed grasses and weeds.

"What are you stopping here for?" I asked because I was totally clueless.

"We are goin' fishin'!" Tom said

with real excitement in his voice. "I've fished here before and got permission from the farmer last week. So hop out; let's go!"

I sat there, half irritated because I wanted to get home and half aggravated because I didn't particularly like to fish. But every once in a while you have to go with the flow, be a good sport, give a little. I could tell Morris was fired up and figured I didn't have much choice - he had the truck keys.

I grumbled about not being dressed for fishing just as Tom threw a pair of boots at me with a "Your rod and reel are in the back of the Expedition."

"So, Tom," I offered, "are we taking the Ford Expedition on a fishing expedition?"

"That's it!" Tom shot back as he got the bait around and locked up the truck.

We crawled through the barbed wire fence and walked less than a hundred yards through some fairly heavily wooded ground. We were on the west side of a narrow valley that seemed to run about north and south. The sun was over the slope and it was beyond chilly, almost cold. We made our way to the creek that ran along the foot of the slope. It was dead quiet and you could here the stream babble as it ran over rocks

and through its course.

Tom picked a spot and we got set up. Although we were past the water cress season, there was a patch of it on the opposite site of the creek, near the bank. When I said I'd like to harvest it, Tom said, "we're here to fish, not pick water cress. Here, your equipment is ready."

There were some dark figures moving in the water, which I quickly pointed out to Morris.

They are the reason we stopped here. Let's catch 'em!"

In a matter of a few minutes, Tom had two fish on the stringer and within 15 minutes I landed a beautiful trout. I went from chilly to almost cold, but the fish were biting and we didn't quit until the dew was on the grass and it was nearly dark.

We made it back to the truck, and I was really happy. "What a great time, Tom!" I said as I gave him a pat on the back.

"I figured you would like the fishing down here," Tom smiled.

We got loaded, headed back toward the capital city and called home to tell our families we were alive and well and two hours from home.

It was quite a day in Wisconsin's Ocooch Mountains, one of the innumerable reasons why we love our state. I was already looking forward to our next meeting. ♣

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