

# In Search of O.J. Noer

By Lori Ward Bocher

When I started writing for *The Grass Roots* 10 years ago, there's one name that came up over and over again: **O.J. Noer**. The Wisconsin turf industry even started the O.J. Noer Research Foundation in honor of him. And, 25 years after his death, they named the Research and Education Facility after him.

What could garner so much respect for one man? For many years, he was *the* golf turf guru in the state and in the nation. He was nick-named "Mr. Turf." In today's world of specialization, where we have turf breeders, turf entomologists, turf pathologists - you get the picture - there probably never will be another turf generalist with a reputation and following like O.J. Noer's.

O.J. Noer died in 1966, but his legend lives on. So when Monroe Miller heard that an elderly relative of O.J.'s lived in Mt. Horeb, he was anxious to have me interview him for *The Grass Roots*. "Call Tom Schwab at the Noer Facility. He knows where this gentleman can be reached," Monroe told me.

And so I called Tom and began my search for O.J. Noer. "Yes," Tom said, "his name is Peter Vea. He doesn't live in Mt. Horeb anymore. I believe he lives in Madison now." Tom checked the telephone book and gave me a phone number.

Monroe thought it would be best if I could do this interview in person, not on the telephone like I usually do. That way I could get a picture. I agreed, and waited for a time when I'd be near Madison.

## Making the connection...

When I finally called Mr. Vea to schedule an appointment, he gave me directions to his residence.



Peter Vea, O.J. Noer's cousin taken Feb 2000.

"Take University Avenue west, turn left on Segoe Road, and then take the first left again. I live in the Segoe Terrace apartments," he said.

Now, I'm the type who likes to know exactly where I'm going. Since University Avenue runs past the back side of Monroe's course, I called his shop to see if someone could tell me how far west I'd have to go on University to get to Segoe Road. "It's the first road past Hilldale Shopping Center, up on top of the hill," I was told. It had been a while since I'd been to Monroe's course, but I seemed to recall that it was awfully close to Hilldale, too.

Once in Madison, I headed west on University Avenue. Sure enough, when I turned left on Segoe, I could see Monroe's course. When I pulled up to park in front of Mr. Vea's apartment building, the irony hit me. Monroe had sent me in search of O.J. Noer when he

could have walked right over from his own shop to meet Peter Vea!"

I entered the front hallway and called Peter through the security system intercom. He buzzed me in. I took the elevator to the 7th floor, got out, and saw him waiting for me in the hallway. He was slightly bent over his walker - helps him keep his balance, I later learned. He wore a suit and tie. Was he still dressed for church? Or did he dress up for my visit? I never asked.

We exchanged greetings and he invited me into his small apartment. The computer, with stacks of paper surrounding it, told me that he was still an active guy. "I was up half the night worried about your interview," Peter admitted. "Called my brother, too. I'm not sure how much I can tell you about Oyvind."

Oyvind. So that's what the "O" in O.J. stood for.

Peter explained to me how he and O.J. were related; Peter's father, Fritchiof (who went by F.J.), was a brother to O.J.'s mother, Ada. That would make them cousins.

"He was sort of a studious guy," Peter remembered of O.J. "He had this idea that sewerage would be a good thing for helping the ground. He went to the Milwaukee Sewerage Commission and they hired him right away." The rest, as they say, is Milorganite history.

"That's when he got started going to all the golf courses," Peter continued. "He also traveled with the golf course architect, Robert Trent Jones. When he moved to Milwaukee we still kept in touch. But he was always gone, traveling around the country."



**Rich family history...**

Mr. Vea told me much about the rich history of their family. Matthew Vea, grandfather to both O.J. and Peter, immigrated to the U.S. from Norway. "He was a tailor in Norway," Peter pointed out. "When he got to Boston with a lot of his Norwegian friends, they told him he couldn't have a foreign-sounding name like Vea. They told him to become Johnson. And he did."

"Later, one of my uncles changed his name back to Vea, and others in the family followed him," Peter added, explaining why he is now a Vea and not a Johnson. Peter thought the "J" in O.J. stood for Johnson. But other accounts say O.J.'s middle name was Juul.

Matthew Vea Johnson ended up in Stoughton, Wis. "In Norway, family members brought their money to the tailor to take care of it," Peter explained. "That happened in Stoughton, too. Our grandfather, Matthew, started the First National Bank in Stoughton. He couldn't read or write English. Every transaction

was kept in his head. He was also an entrepreneur. He owned nine different farms at one time. Then he sold them all to buy a wagon factory in Stoughton."

Matthew and his wife had 13 children, of which Peter's father, Fritchiof, was the youngest. O.J.'s mother, Ada, was the third oldest child. O.J., born in 1890, was 22 years older than his cousin Peter, born in 1912.

Ada married Julius Noer, a family doctor who delivered many babies. He, too, was Norwegian. "I never saw him very much," Peter said of O.J.'s father and his own uncle. "He was always busy with his medical practice. He was considered a very good doctor. Often when we had family get-togethers he would come and then have to leave early to be with a patient."

As a child, Peter spent more time with his Aunt Ada, O.J.'s mother. "She was just a lovely woman," Peter said. "She only had two children, O.J. and Rebecca. They lived in a lovely house in Stoughton where O.J. went

to school. All of my aunts were just wonderful to us. We children were all a part of the family. It was a big family and a togetherness family."

Peter remembers O.J.'s wife, too. "We called her Andy, but her real name was Judy. She was from Baltimore," he pointed out. "She used to say, 'I'm a Baltimore oriole.' I'm not sure how he met her. I have a feeling the University sent him out there for some research work and that's when he met her. But that's just guess work."

O.J. and Andy had only one daughter, Mary Carvel. As an adult, she lived in California. When O.J. retired in the mid 1960s, they moved out there to be near her. And that's where he died, in 1966.

**Family of achievers...**

Visiting with Peter, I got the impression that he and O.J. were surrounded by achievers while they were growing up. One uncle helped engineer the New York City subway system. One traveled internationally (way back near the other turn of the century) for the Institute of Pacific Relations. Another uncle, a geologist, along with Peter's father, homesteaded a piece of property in Idaho that contained marble that was pure calcium carbonate.

"They felt that they could develop this into an industry. First, they provided calcium carbonate to Amalgamated Sugar to use in bleaching sugar. And later they developed calcite for chicken feed," Peter explained.

The family also stuck together. Peter's father, an engineer, ran the wagon factory in Stoughton for many years. "He was the one that everyone depended on," Peter said. "All of the children from his sisters' families were sent to work at the factory. My dad was just that kind of a guy. He took care of everyone."

That included O.J., who needed a job in the late 1920's. "By then my father was leasing dump trucks to the state which was building lots of roads at the time," Peter recalled.

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"O.J. was in charge of the leasing. After a few years he went back to the University for more studies. They lived on Breeze Terrace next to the Congregational Church."

### Peter's life...

Peter graduated from Stoughton High School in 1930 and from the

University of Wisconsin in 1941. "I thought I wanted to be an engineer like my father. But I could not get through calculus. Flunked it in my sophomore year," Peter recalled. "So I went into accounting instead."

He worked for Sears for his entire career, except during World War II

when he served in the U.S. Navy. He was in his 30's at the time, with a wife and daughter at home. "I lived through a kamikaze attack on a carrier," he vividly remembered. After retiring from Sears in 1964, Peter and his wife, Lucille, lived in Florida for 22 years before moving back to Wisconsin where their two daughters lived. Lucille died of heart trouble a few years later.

Peter gave me a list of the descendants of Ada and Julius Noer. It included O.J. and Andy; their daughter, Mary Carvel Van der Burch; her three children; and some great-grandchildren of O.J. It also included O.J.'s sister, Rebecca, and her three children. But, using the addresses on this sheet from 1992, Peter had not been able to make contact with any of these relatives.

And so ended my visit. Peter walked me to the elevator, rode down with me, came outside with me, and walked me to the end of the sidewalk. I think he didn't want the visit to end. "I'm sorry I couldn't tell you more about O.J.," he said.

"No, that's just fine," I reassured him. "It was a real pleasure to meet you." We shook hands, and then he reached out and gave me a big hug. I was glad that I had taken this walk down memory lane with him.

### More research...

A few days later I called Monroe. "Can you send me some information on O.J.?" I asked. "I need some more details about his career." And so he sent me a 1984 issue of *The Grass Roots* that he calls his "O.J. Noer issue." This issue helped me fill in some of the details in Mr. Turf's life.

- Born in 1890 in Stoughton, Wis.
- Graduated from Stoughton High School in 1908.
- Graduated from the University of Wisconsin in 1912, with a BS in soils and a minor in chemistry.
- Worked for the Soil Survey Service.
- Was a state soil chemist for Wisconsin in 1914.



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- Taught general and analytical chemistry at the UW from 1915 to 1917.
- Served in the Chemical Warfare Service during World War I, 1917 to 1920.
- Married Julie (or Judy) Anderson - better known as Andy - in 1920.
- Worked at the Stoughton Wagon Company in the 1920s.
- Returned to graduate school at the UW where he earned an MS in turf agronomy and did all the necessary work for his PhD except for writing the thesis. Went to graduate school on a partial fellowship created by the Milwaukee Sewerage Commission for research into what would become Milorganite.
- Became an employee of the Milwaukee Sewerage Commission in the mid 1930's, specializing in the use of

Milorganite on golf courses. Visited golf courses across the nation and in several foreign countries. He retired as sales manager and chief agronomist (in 1960?).

- Worked as a consulting agronomist after retiring from MSC.
- Noer Research Foundation was initiated in 1959 by associates and friends of O.J. Noer.
- Noer dies in 1966.
- O.J. Noer Research and Education Facility opens in 1992.
- Charlie Wilson, Noer's successor at Milorganite, wrote: "Noer was the consummate agronomist. His involvement covered anything that happened to turfgrass."
- Jim Latham called Noer, "North America's most widely known, respected and beloved turfgrass agronomist." (Latham was

research director of the O.J. Noer Research Foundation at the time the O.J. Noer issue of *The Grass Roots* came out.)

And so ends my search for O.J. Noer. I enjoyed this trip back in time, learning of Norwegian immigrants, family togetherness, and professional achievements. I can see how O.J.'s family and time in history shaped the man he became. He grew up in a era when men achieved outside the home and women nurtured inside the home. He lived in an era when we thought science would solve all of the world's problems, and scientists were less specialized than they are today. He worked in an era of "company men" who stayed with one company for most of their career.

For these reasons and more, there will never be another O.J. Noer. It's good to remember him. ♣

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