

Three Generations of Schallers are Linked to the Links

By Lori Ward Bocher



There are two people missing in the room – Hans Schaller and Fritz Schaller who are no longer on this earth. But they are well remembered by two contemporary superintendents, Tom Schaller and Scott Schaller who speak of their family's three generations of work as golf course superintendents.

As the GCSAA celebrates its 75th anniversary, it only seems fitting to take a look back. And who better to do that than the Schallers. Their family has been involved with golf courses for almost as long as the GCSAA has been in existence.

First let's build a family tree. Hans Schaller, born in Germany in 1897, came to this country in 1924. Trained as an architect and seaman in Germany, he found himself working a variety of jobs in the U.S. But mostly he was a builder of homes and golf courses and also a golf course greenkeeper, as they were called in those days.

His two sons, Tom and Fritz, also worked as golf course superintendents and builders. Fritz died in 1979. Tom has been the superintendent at North Brook Country Club in Luxemburg since 1969. Fritz's son, Scott, is the superintendent at North Shore Golf Club in Menasha and a past president of WGCSA. And one of Tom's sons, Steve, is a golf pro turned golf course manager at Rancho las Palmas Country Club in Palm Springs, Calif.

The interview...

I meet with Tom and Scott on this cold but sunny February morning at the North Shore clubhouse. This stately clubhouse wraps me in the traditional world of golf. So, too, will the conversation I'm about to have with Tom and Scott. They start by showing me some pictures and a



Scott and Tom Schaller.

newspaper article about their father/grandfather, Hans.

Of course, golf courses and the methods of maintaining them have changed a lot since Hans first worked on a course back in the 1930s. Even the name has changed, from greenkeeper to golf course superintendent. But what I find most interesting during our two hours together is the different ways in which three generations of Schallers end up working on golf courses. You might say the first generation was forced into it, the second generation fell into it, and the third generation has chosen it as a profession.

Tom and Scott explain. When a 26-year-old Hans came to this country in 1924, he became a carpenter, building houses in the Chicago area. He once said his greatest satisfaction in life was providing homes for families. He worked his way up in the construction company. But then the Depression hit, and homes weren't in great demand. "The boss said, 'Houses are slow. You're going

to build me a golf course,' " Tom recalls his father telling him. "So he built a 27-hole course, Old Orchard, in Arlington Heights, Ill. He built the club house, too. And he stayed on the be the greenkeeper. But he wasn't happy with just greenkeeping. He wanted to build."

Grandson Scott still has the books that Hans purchased to learn about golf course construction and maintenance: the 1929 book, "The Links" by Robert Hunter; the 1931 book, "Common Sense for Greenkeepers"; and others. He got them out when the GCSAA was looking for historical material for its 75th anniversary.

Bounced around...

Hans held many different jobs over the years, going back and forth between building homes, building or renovating golf courses, and serving as a greenkeeper. Of course, at the time, greenkeepers were laid off in the off-season, so taking on different jobs was the norm. Son Tom was born in 1937 when Hans was still working at Old Orchard; he

recalls leaving Arlington Heights when he was 5 or 6 years old.

After World War II, Hans helped meet the pent-up demand for new homes by building more than 200 houses. But he didn't get some federal money he counted on because the new homeowners refused to sign a nondiscrimination clause that the government required. "He lost everything," Tom recalls. "He used to say, 'I wasn't just a little broke. I was all broke.'"

In 1959, Hans' other son, Fritz (Scott's dad) encouraged him to get back into the golf course business by applying for a job at Shorewood Country Club in Green Bay – now the site of the UW-Green Bay campus with nine holes of the golf course still remaining. "He told them he was 54 when he was really 62," Tom points out. At one time in the early 1960s, all three Schallers – Hans, Fritz and Tom – were working at Shorewood. Then Hans retired from Shorewood in 1962 and Fritz took over.

Retirement didn't suit Hans, so he took a golf course job in Elkhart, Ind., where he worked another year before health problems forced him to retire again. But he still worked on and off, helping to build or renovate a few courses with Fritz and working as a superintendent at Mid-Vallee Golf Course in DePere for a short time.

"He also built boats in retirement," Tom recalls. "He was quite the man. He had seen a lot of the world by the time he was 16. He went into the Kaiser's navy when he was only 15. He served on submarines in the Mediterranean during World War I. Of the 60 subs in his unit, only 11 came back. And he was one of only two sailors to survive an attack on his sub."

Hans died in 1972 at the age of 74. Grandson Scott was 11 at the time. "My first memory of being on a golf course was with my grandpa at Mid-Vallee when I was 4 years old," Scott says. "In the morning I'd

hop on the Cushman with him. He'd make me jump off the cart and unscrew the quick coupler sprinkler heads that were used for nighttime irrigation. I also remember him encouraging me to be a builder."

The second generation...

So, if Hans' golf career began with a boss who told him to build a course, how did Tom's begin? "I

worked with my father at Shorewood for a couple of years, then I married, had children, and had to work at other jobs," he explains. He had no specific career goal of becoming a superintendent. But his family connections pulled him back a few years later.

When Shorewood was purchased for UW-Green Bay and cut back to a

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9-hole course, many of the club members wanted to build a new course. Hans and Fritz were hired to build it. That course was North Brook Country Club in Luxemburg. When it opened in 1969, Tom signed on as the superintendent. And he's been there ever since. "We think that Tom has been at the same course longer than any other superintendent in Wisconsin," Scott says of his uncle.

As a second generation golf course superintendent in the Schaller family, Tom has probably witnessed the most changes in how a golf course is managed and main-

tained. Equipment is much improved. Irrigation systems have changed drastically. Courses are more manicured. "It's a more delicate job now than it was years ago," Tom points out.

When I ask if he'd rather be doing his job now or in 1970, he answers, "That's a tough question. Probably now because we've got so much more to work with to get the job done well." And when I ask what he learned from his father that has helped him in his profession, Tom answers, "Just about everything, especially how to handle workers."

They learned common sense...

Scott adds, "Common sense, too. Tom has it. My father had it, too. Common sense is an important factor in doing your job every day. I think that's why Tom has been successful. He's been able to adapt and keep up with the times. He's always stayed on top of changes. So much has changed in his 31 years on the job. You have to keep up if you're going to be successful."

Tom says he plans to retire in two or three years. Scott adds, "You better write down 12 years. He's never going to retire."

While Tom put down roots at one golf course, his brother Fritz was more like their father, moving from job to job. When Hans left Shorewood in 1962, Fritz stayed on as superintendent. While there, he put in one of the state's first golf course fairway irrigation systems on Shorewood's 18-hole course. When UW-Green Bay took over, Fritz maintained the grounds for the entire campus, including the golf course which was pared down to nine holes.

But Fritz didn't like just campus work, so he took a leave of absence from UW-Green Bay to do other things. In the late 1960s, Fritz and Hans built Woodside Golf Course in Green Bay, added a second nine holes at Mid-Valley Golf Course in Green Bay, and built North Brook in Luxemburg. In 1972, Fritz left the university. "At that point in my dad's career, I think he wanted to be a golf course builder. But the economy wasn't strong enough," Scott recalls.

Moving around...

In 1973, Fritz moved the family to Fargo, N.D. where Robert Trent Jones, Jr., was building the Oxbow Country Club. Fritz was hired as the grow-in superintendent and was there for two years. Scott was 12 at the time and remembers the course being right on the Red River. "We lived in a real nice place, but it really was a barren area," he recalls of North Dakota.

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When the Oxbow grow-in was complete, the Schallers moved back to Wisconsin where Fritz was involved with two failed attempts to build new courses in Door County; one was stopped for lack of funding, and the other was stopped by the DNR. Then he was hired by Alpine Golf Club in Egg Harbor to build a third 9-hole course.

Scott's first golf course job was at Alpine. "I was 14 years old," he recalls. "The course was being built on a rock pile. My main job was to pick rocks."

When Alpine was complete, Fritz finished construction and grow-in of Lost Creek Golf Course south of Sturgeon Bay. He stayed on as superintendent there beginning in 1977. He died in 1979 when Scott was 17 years old.

Scott spent two summers working at Lost Creek – one before and one after his father's death. He graduated from high school in 1980 and then attended UW-Stevens Point for two years. "I decided that school wasn't for me," he recalls. "I probably enjoyed my social life too much. I knew I wanted to work on a golf course. And everyone I knew in the business – my father, uncle and grandfather – hadn't gone to school to learn how to do it."

So he left college and went to work for his uncle Tom at North Brook for two years. "He really taught me how to work," Scott says. "That's when I really started getting interested in the business. He helped me a bunch." Then Tom helped Scott get a job as an assistant superintendent at the Peninsula State Park course where Scott worked for almost three years.

"At that point I woke up," Scott admits. "I realized what everyone had told me about the importance of going to school was right. Without an education, being an assistant was a dead-end job."

A terrific mentor...

Then Scott got his "lucky break," as he calls it. "I got a job as an assis-

tant under Rod Johnson at Pine Hills Country Club in Sheboygan," he points out, adding that Rod is one of the best superintendents in the state. "I was really lucky to be able to work with someone who was so strong in his profession."

One of the stipulations of Scott's job was that he go back to school, and Pine Hills would even help pay for it. "Rod really wanted to help me reach my goal," Scott adds. So he worked at Pine Hills during the golf season, and he enrolled in the turf program at Penn State from October 1986 to March 1987. "It was really intense. They cram two years of work into that condensed time frame."

After getting his degree, Scott stayed at Pine Hills through the 1988 season. "We had the Wisconsin State Amateur tournament that year, so it was a real good learning experience," Scott adds.

In the fall of 1988, Scott got his first superintendent's job at South Hills Golf and Country Club in Fond du Lac. "They had gone through four or five superintendents in five years, so I got the job because nobody else wanted it," he quips. Scott turned the tide and stayed for 7-1/2 years.

"And I really enjoyed it there," he adds. "I think the membership realized it shouldn't be a stepping-stone golf course anymore. We did a lot of work to improve it."

From the foot to the head...

In 1996, Scott was hired as the superintendent at North Shore Golf Club in Menasha, thereby moving from the southern shore of Lake Winnebago to its northern shore. "This is an outstanding job and an outstanding membership to work for," Scott says. "It's an older membership that really loves its golf course. They're very golf oriented. They will spend money to improve things – will do what it takes to get things done."

Scott also likes the history of North Shore, its gracious old clubhouse, and the fact that there have been only five superintendents in the course's 70-year history. "I inherited a golf course that was perfect," he says. "Roger Bell did a great job here."

For Scott, the best decision in his career was to go back to school and get his turf degree. "I was 25 years old then and more mature," he says. "I really dedicated myself to doing well. I was in one of Dr. Joe Duich's last classes. He taught not only the

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agronomic part, but the artistic part and the common sense part, too.

"When I was working for Tom or my father, I knew how to do things. But I didn't know why I did things," Scott adds. "It all came together for me a school." Even though he has a two-year degree, Scott recommends that, in today's job market, it's important to have a four-year degree. "The job market is very tight in Wisconsin."

Tom agrees. "You must go to school now," he says. "Even if you're as smart as hell, you need that piece of paper."

A brotherhood...

As an industry outsider, what strikes me most about my two-hour visit with Tom and Scott is the sense of fraternity in the profession, of colleagues helping one another. Scott had blood relatives to help him get started. But he also had people like Rod Johnson who saw to

it that he got an education.

Now Scott and Tom are helping others to get a foothold in the profession. "When I find someone who has potential, who has an honest desire, those are the people I like to encourage in the profession," he says. "The downfall of this is that these people eventually move on. But nobody held me down. They gave me a lot of help and direction."

Both gentleman have enjoyed the comradery of the WGCSA, too. Scott served as president in 1998 and 1999. "We give people an opportunity to stay current," Scott says. "But it's the relationships I've developed with these guys that's the best thing for me. We all care about what we do."


Tom adds, "You get together, and that's how you learn - from each other."

"My closest friends are in the business," Scott says. "It's a brother-

hood. Everybody shares. There's competition, too, but we all share with each other."

Ya gotta love it...

As the interview winds down, Scott shares some of what he loves about his chosen profession. "It's a rewarding profession," he says. "Every day you ask yourself, 'Did we do the best we could to get the course ready?' If you did, that's a great feeling."

"I admit that I have bad days when I drive by an office building and wonder how much easier it would be to work there," he continues. "But when I get to work early in the morning and see the course and the lake, I'm glad to be here. And I love the seasonal changes here in Wisconsin. You rekindle the flame with each season. It never gets monotonous. I'm anxious for each season to come." 

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