

Lightning Leads Him From Cows to Turf

By Lori Ward Bocher

If it weren't for a bolt of lightning that struck the year he was born, Bill Vogel might not be where he is today – CEO and part owner of Spring Valley. His company, which makes professional turf and ice melt products, is based in Jackson, Wisconsin, where Bill was born on a dairy farm 47 years ago. But if it weren't for that bolt of lightning, Bill might be milking cows today.

"The year I was born, a bolt of lightning hit the barn and killed virtually the entire herd because the cows were in metal stanchions," Bill explains. "Half of the

herd had a second mortgage on them already because Dad was young and just starting out. He had no income and a couple of crying babies in the house.

"He had to go out and try to develop income any way he could, so he started selling alfalfa and corn seed, then hay, and then fertilizer," he continues. "One thing led to another, and soon he had a successful farm fertilizer business here – Vogel Seed and Fertilizer."

Plans to return home...

Growing up with agricultural ties, Bill went to the University of



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Wisconsin-Madison where he received a BS in agronomy in 1976. As planned, he returned to the family company upon graduation. But he took the business in a different direction by starting the Spring Valley Turf Products Division of Vogel Seed and Fertilizer. "I had always enjoyed working in the green industry," Bill explains. "I enjoyed the people. They were real optimistic and fun to work with. And the idea of taking a piece of ground and making it beautiful had always intrigued me."

So Bill went out to find new customers for this new division. "I went through the Yellow Pages and started calling people," he remembers. "That was very tough. People would ask, 'Who are you? Why should we buy from you if

we've never heard of you?' So I asked myself, 'What can I offer these people that they're not getting now?'

"I decided that, if I got a bag printed up that didn't have a company name printed on top, I could go into 'Joe's Landscaping' and say, 'Here, I can put your name right on top of this bag,'" Bill continues. "So we set up a little screen printing system in the basement of our house and my wife, Joyce, did the printing."

"The first year we started doing this I told her we might print a couple of thousand bags," Bill says. "We ended up doing 60,000 or 70,000. My wife nearly shot me. But she was a real trooper and realized that this was a big help to the business. We don't do this anymore. But it was a way for us to

offer something unique to customers and get their business."

Company evolves...

Within about 10 years, the company evolved from a farm fertilizer business to a professional turf fertilizer business. This was due not only to the new markets Bill was creating, but also due to the manufacturing equipment. "We had to bring in a lot of special equipment to screen and size the turf fertilizer just right," Bill recalls. "That made it very cost prohibitive to do farm grades because you don't need all the special equipment for that. We sold off the farm fertilizer division more than 10 years ago."

But fertilizer is still the main product for Spring Valley. "What we do is get rail cars or truckloads of bulk ingredients, and then we blend and package them to the

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customer's specifications," Bill explains. "We have specialized in greens grade fertilizer. We private label greens grade products for several of the national distributors. We built a special plant that makes nothing but greens grade. There's only one other like it in the world, as far as we know. The greens grade is a major part of our business and our growth for the future because we've invested a lot of time and money into our plant.

"We also make a lot of fairway fertilizers and weed and feed products," Bill adds.

"Another huge part of our business is in ice melt products – the stuff you throw on your sidewalks," he continues. "We sell Professional Ice Melter to the janitorial/sanitation market. We don't sell much of that to the retail market."

Local, national and international sales...

Today, Spring Valley has three main channels for sales: direct sales to the golf course, landscape and lawn care market in Wisconsin only; national sales of turf fertilizers and ice melt products to distributors across the U.S.; and international sales of fertilizers.

Bill never intended to get into the export market 10 years ago. "But we had several customers who wanted our product and kept pestering us for it," he recalls. "It was a lot of work to get into exporting; the amount of paper work required is tremendous. But, now it's a lot easier. Now it's an important part of our business." Spring Valley has one salesman selling to distributors in the United Kingdom and Belgium and another covering the Pacific Rim.

The Wisconsin market has access to the most products and services offered from Spring Valley. "We have six salesmen who sell in the Wisconsin market, direct to the lawn care, landscape and

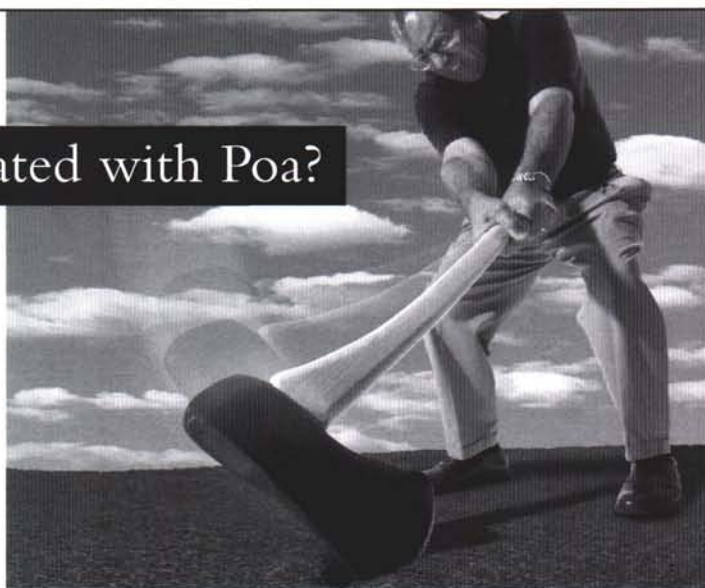
golf course people," Bill explains. "In Wisconsin we sell seed and chemicals along with our fertilizer. And we have an applicator truck for golf courses that takes 1.5 hours to fertilize an 18-hole course. It's a high flotation unit with big balloon-type wheels so it doesn't compact the soil."

Outside of Wisconsin, their two salesmen sell only to distributors – no direct sales or ancillary services.

Marketing strategy...

Since starting Spring Valley in 1976, Bill's marketing strategy has been focused and effective. "At first, we were a regional fertilizer supplier. We realized the Midwest was our market," Bill points out. "But we had aspirations to grow the company in the future. How could we do that? How could we compete in the marketplace? We said, 'Let's find a customer need out there that isn't being filled, and let's try to go after it.' We try to lis-

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ten to our customers, find out what they really want, and make a product that will help them solve their problems."

That's how greens grade fertilizer became a major part of their business. "We looked around and found that there were a lot of other fertilizer companies that didn't like to make greens grade and wanted somebody else to do it for them," Bill recalls. "So we said, 'OK, we can do that for you.'"

"With the ice melt product, we were looking to see how we could keep our labor busy in the winter-time," Bill explains. "We looked at several options, but an ice melt product worked well with our equipment and sales staff, so we went with that. We use a lot of the fertilizer equipment to manufacture it."

Over a two-year period, Bill himself derived the formula for Professional Ice Melter, which is a blend of four chlorides. "We looked for a combination that would give the maximum melting capacity with minimum plant damage," Bill says. "We're very proud of the result. It's very effective."

More to come...

The company is poised for future growth. "We now have a plant in Grand Rapids, Michigan, that makes the same products as our Wisconsin plant," Bill points out. "We wanted to be closer to our market on the other side of Lake Michigan. And right now we're putting up a 7,000-ton storage facility in Jackson. We're also looking at other locations across the U.S. to find sites that would work well with our distribution system and help the company grow."

Spring Valley is a 50-50 partnership between Bill and his brother, Randy. "Randy is in charge of production, shipping and building," Bill points out. "I'm head of sales and marketing." The company employs about 50 people.

His pride shows...

When it comes to turf, there are a few pieces of ground of which Bill's especially proud. "We are the official fertilizer choice of the Green Bay Packers, which is really exciting for everybody here," he says. "We don't get any game tick-

ets, but it's fun.

"And our golf product line has been used on some of the premier courses in the area," he adds. "Milwaukee County uses our products on their courses, including for the Greater Milwaukee Open. And when the PGA championship was

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played at Medina down in Chicago a few years ago, they used a lot of our products."

Bill is also proud of, and thankful for, the support his wife, Joyce, has given him over the years. In addition to screen printing those individual bags in the beginning of Spring Valley's history, she has managed the payroll and written a newsletter – from the convenience of the home while the kids were growing up.

Bill and Joyce have three children: Larry, 25; Julie, 22; and Daniel, 20. "As a family, we love to snowboard," Bill relates. "In fact, I'm director of snowboarding at Sunburst Ski Hill in Kewaukum. My son Daniel and I compete in snowboarding. Daniel has qualified for the last three years in the Boarder Cross event at the nationals. We go out East and out West to

different competitions. It's a lot of fun in the wintertime."

Still enjoys people and plants...

For someone who started out in the turf industry because he liked the people and the way they artistically turn a piece of ground into a thing of beauty, Bill hasn't been disappointed. "Golf course superintendents are great people," Bill believes. "Being born and raised on a farm, I like down-to-earth people, and that's what golf course superintendents are. Like I said earlier, that's one of the reasons I enjoy this business. It's like a big fraternity. Everybody understands what it's all about and we all help each other out."

Bill does his part on the professional scene. "I was fortunate to be on the WTA board when they were planning the O.J. Noer Center," he

says. "It was good to see that come to be." He resigned from the board when he was elected vice president of his church and needed to focus his attention there.

"Now I've gotten involved with the Wisconsin Landscape Federation," he points out. "I'm currently vice president. I do a lot of legislative monitoring for the industry, which is very important. There are a lot of bills in Madison that affect our industry. I also set up the web page for the organization, which was a neat project."

Bill is also secretary of the Grounds Maintenance Association of Wisconsin.

"The industry has given me a lot. I want to give back everything I can to the industry because it's been so good to me. And I enjoy doing it," Bill concludes. ♻

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