



A Long Road Trip

By **Monroe S. Miller**, Golf Course Superintendent, Blackhawk Country Club

In retrospect it probably wasn't the smartest thing to do. Short trips to local WGCSA meetings, turf conferences, field days and other such events are one thing. But it is a long way from Wisconsin to Florida and a lot of things can happen when four golf course superintendents (and friends) ride together to get to the GCSAA conference and show. I mean, when you get four guys traveling together who are normally in charge and making their own very independent decisions, well, let's just say there are bound to be opportunities for disagreement and conflict. And for sure there is a chance there will be a few adventures along the way. Let me tell you about our recent trip.

It was Tom Morris' idea to drive his big red Ford Excursion to Florida and the GCSAA conference. He invited me to ride along, and in turn extended the invitation to Steady Eddie Middleton and Bogey Calhoun. He knew we were all headed to conference alone and weren't taking any vacation time in Florida. "We'll have a great time," Tom said, full of enthusiasm. "And we will be able

to solve many of the world's problems on the way there. My vehicle has plenty of room and we will be able to save our clubs some money. We cans split our travel costs four ways."

Calhoun and Middleton thought it was a great idea. We made reservations at the same hotel back in August or September, bunking two to a room, and didn't think about the trip until after the WTA EXPO. There was minor disagreement about a departure date – Calhoun, of course, wanted to play in the tournament. But Tom solved that quickly with "then you won't be riding with us, Calhoun." We compromised on the seminar days, settled on travel time, and by deduction we then knew when we would leave.

Tom, since it was his Ford, made up a few rules. The first was that all drivers would abide by the speed limit. "Aw, c'mon old feller," Calhoun whined. "That won't be any fun."

"Then you won't be doing any driving," Tom threatened. "That won't be any fun either."

Tom allowed each of us one large suitcase (or two medium ones), a suit bag and a brief case. Calhoun cried again.

"What about my golf clubs?" Bogey wanted to know.

"Rent some when we get there," Tom replied very matter-of-factly. I'm not renting a trailer to haul your golf equipment to Florida. Period. End of discussion."

As we got closer to our departure date, Tom let us know about his travel rules. "That's the beauty of driving your personal vehicle on a trip like this – you get to make the rules," he said. "The driver will determine the radio station. I like this rule since I'll be doing most of the driving. I hope you guys like the oldies stations. Each of you can bring two of your favorite CDs to play on the road, but be reasonable."

"Tom, would music by Brahms and Mahler be OK?" I wondered. He frowned but said nothing.

Calhoun and Middleton groaned, but Tom gave me the OK, albeit grudgingly.

"What do you other guys listen to?"

Steady Eddie loved Frank Sinatra and said he'd bring a coupe of Frank's classic CDs. Bogey piped up with "my two favorite groups are *The Hay Balers* and *The Milking Machines*. Plan on some down home serious country music, boys," he said with the full knowledge that his choices would irritate the rest of us.

"Your turn may never come, Calhoun," Tom said. "I'm bringing my *Vilas Craig and the Vicounts Greatest Hits*

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I knew deciding on eating spots would be a problem, but we decided to defer to that as we went along. Tom liked the buffets since his favorite was the Saturday night, half-price, all-you-can-eat Kielbasa buffets here at home. I favored the Cracker Barrel, and Eddie didn't much care. Calhoun was actually easy – all he ever eats is hamburgers. If he were to dine with the Queen or England or even the Pope, he would order a hamburger and a beer to wash it down.

Tom and Steady Eddie agreed they should share a room since they both were obnoxious snorers. The thinking was they would cancel each other. That left me with Calhoun. He didn't snore, but he was notorious for practical jokes. I warned him not to bother.

Finally, we decided that since we were traveling on two weekends we would try to accommodate each man with two site visits of interest – short stops for sure and definitely not off the main route. Tom wanted to stop at the Ford truck/SUV plant in Louisville and the Ford/New Holland tractor factory in Georgia. Steady Eddie was thrilled by the prospect of seeing the Indy racetrack and

the Kentucky Derby's Churchill Downs. Calhoun was consistent – he was determined we stop at the Jack Daniels distillery in Tennessee and the Miller Brewery we would pass near – “maybe we can sample the finished products!” he said with a wide grin.

Me? I wanted to see President Zachary Taylor's home and burial site in Louisville. In his Army days when he was young he was stationed at Fort Crawford in Prairie du Chien and on occasion visited the Villa Louis mansion. And I also wanted to see an obscure Civil War battle site in Tennessee where the Confederates and a Wisconsin regiment my great-great-great-great grandfather was assigned to during the war fought. Our search for that skirmish site is where this story really begins.

Actually, the variety of the stops was cool and none took too long. There was no complaining or arguing or conflict on the trip. We were having a great time. Well, there was one conflict when Calhoun smelled Tom's truck up really badly and laughed hilariously about it until Tom pulled over and threatened to drop him off at the next airport or bus station. We all backed Tom, and Bogey got the message.

We spent an uneventful night in Kentucky at the



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Family Values Inn, a Christian motel. "We won't even be able to get a beer," Calhoun complained to no avail. "But we will get a good night's sleep," Tom said with confidence.

Early the next morning we headed for the weathered hills and mountains of central Tennessee and the Civil War battlefield I wanted to see. I knew about where it was, but not exactly. We exited the interstate and started the search. Calhoun and Middleton were sound asleep, a blessing since Bogey for sure would have been complaining about time wasted looking for something as unexciting as a Civil War site.

We passed through the center of a small town, population of about a thousand, given as the location of the battle in the history book I had with me. "Better pull over so I can ask somebody for directions, Tom."

Tom drove to the curb and lowered the window so I could ask a gal pushing a stroller down the sidewalk for directions. We must have frightened her, or at least surprised her. "Never heard of it," she said as she quickly went on her way.

"Find a gas station, Tom," I suggested, "and I'll run in and ask again." He did, and the clerk knew exactly what I was talking about. The directions were a little complicated, to

the point where I needed to write them down. It wasn't a major tourist attraction and it wasn't on any main road.

"Can we give it a shot?" I asked Tom. "That's the deal," he replied, although there was a definite enthusiasm deficit in his voice. We wandered up and down the hills on narrow town roads and as we rounded a fairly sharp curve, the big red Ford died.

Tom was flustered as he maneuvered it off to the side of the road. Calhoun and Middleton barely stirred. Tom popped the hood and was looking under it in a matter of seconds. I got out, stretched and looked around to see where we were. There wasn't much to see – we were deep in the country of the South. The landscape was mostly open, although I couldn't tell what agricultural crops were being grown. A few wooded areas added to the beauty. Odd as it seemed, on the left side of the road and down a quarter of a mile or so was a golf course.

"Probably an electronic problem," Tom surmised with surprising calm. "It will take some specialized diagnostic equipment to determine exactly what is wrong. We are going to have to find a Ford dealer."

"Tom, see that golf course?" I asked. "Let's hoof it over and see if the superintendent can give us a hand. He will at least know who to call."

We roused Calhoun and Middleton, told them to stay with the truck, and then we headed off for the golf course. We didn't see a single golfer on the course, so we walked across fairways and roughs toward the shop, which was clearly visible on the edge of the course. As we got closer we could see some activity on the green nearest the shop. "I think they're aerifying," Tom said.

As we approached the green, the small crew stopped working and watched us walking toward them. One of them started walking toward us. "Can I help you?" he asked as we met him. He was sweating and a little out of breath, obviously from working hard.

Tom explained our dilemma and asked if he could tell us whom to call. Of course, he was more than glad to. We felt bad since we both knew how hectic aerification was. Then Tom offered, "we are both in the same business you are and we are headed down to the GCSAA conference." He stopped in his tracks, disbelief on his face.

"You're kidding!"

"No," Tom said. "In fact, two more superintendents are back there with the truck." We could see it from where we stood, bright red and shining in the sun.

"I'm Joe Morris," he said as he extended his hand to each of us.


"I wonder if we're related," Tom said as he shook hands. "I'm Tom Morris!" We laughed at the coincidence.

"I'll fill in for you with your crew if you'll help Tom with the call," I offered. I helped push cores together with one of the guys while the other two started to shovel them into a Cushman.

In a few minutes Tom and Joe were back in Joe's elec-



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tric golf car. "A tow truck will be here shortly," Tom said, "but we will be here overnight for sure."

"Tom," I said, "why don't Bogey, Eddie and I stay here and give these guys a hand while you sort out details of getting back on the road. Maybe you can get a loaner from the dealer and come back to pick us up once you have motel rooms lined up for the night?"

"Way ahead of you," Tom replied. "I called Bogey on his cell phone and they are walking up here right now. They think this will be fun."

We were at the Flat Rock Country Club, a nice little nine-hole golf course with bentgrass greens. It was a terrible time to aerify, Joe told us, but it was about the only time he could get the job done with no interference. They had a small crew and were glad for our offer of help. We were glad for Joe Morris' help.

We may have a few years on us, but we also had experience and we fit right in. As Calhoun said, "it doesn't take too much experience to operate a #10 aluminum scoop shovel."

Their aerification procedures were similar to those we knew – pull the cores, harvest them and backfill with a prepared rootzone mix. Nothing was new to us, including the equipment.

In fact, with the extra hands, Joe Morris pulled an older Greensaire out of the shop and put it to work. That made

us feel good, knowing we were really making a contribution to the effort.

Sooner than any of us would have thought, Tom was back. The news wasn't terrible. "We'll likely be rocking by mid-morning tomorrow," he reported as he grabbed a rake to help consolidate cores.

"You don't have to stay here," Joe said.

"Hey," Bogey returned, "this is fun. We haven't had any snow to shovel this winter and every one of us can use some exercise. If you'll have us, we'd love to stay and help finish."

And we did. The day ended earlier than it does when we aerify in the late spring – darkness set in at 6:00 p.m. We left the Flat Rock crew with the bulk of the greens aerifying done.

We shook hands all around when we left. I got directions to the battlefield – it really was hard to find – and promised to call Joe every once in a while. "I'll even get you a Jake hat from Orlando," Bogey offered each of the men.

The rest of the trip was pretty uneventful. The conference, like it always is, was a great time. Traveling together turned out to be a lot of fun; we all agreed we would do it again. In a few years!

But of all the experiences we had, none could come close to aerifying greens at the Flat Rock CC with Joe Morris and his crew. We knew we had made some friends for life and told them we expected to see them in Wisconsin when our aerification time rolled around! ♣



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