

# Christmas at the Big Piney Golf Course

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



It started innocently enough. Dutch Vanderzanden loved the nearly perfect Black Hills spruce that was growing in the clubhouse lawn at the Big Piney Golf Course in northeast Wisconsin. When seen from inside the big house, it was neatly framed by the large windows in the dining room. Late one fall, after Thanksgiving, he decided it would be a nice touch to decorate that favorite spruce tree for Christmas.

Not long after he carefully put big lights on the tree, it snowed. Like most superintendents, Dutch loved to see snow on the ground during the winter months. This first snow of the year was light and

fluffy and generous - a ten-inch blanket covered the golf course. And when his Christmas tree lights were turned on, the scene was like one you would see on a Christmas card. Snow rested on the boughs of the spruce and softened the bright tree lights. Members and diners loved Dutch's decoration.

After the winter season, Dutch purchased a lot of sets of lights for half price, thinking ahead to the next Christmas. If people were so pleased with bright lights on one tree, he could imagine how much they would enjoy seeing the entire clubhouse grounds lit for the holiday season.

Although the historic course

was named Big Piney, the center piece of the circular drive at the club entrance was a huge - 80 feet tall - Norway spruce. It reminded him of the big evergreens in the Indian Hills park in Madison, a park he drove by each time he visited his son Bill at the state University of Wisconsin in Madison. When he picked up Bill at the end of the first semester, the park trees were lit with what appeared to be giant Christmas lights. He drove down to the park for a closer look and discovered the tree was decorated with heavy electrical cord and 100 watt colored bulbs - red, green, blue, white and yellow. He was stunned at the

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beauty the lights brought to the park at night during the Christmas season.

A few days and a few phone calls later gave him a source for these giant decorations. Using money from the scrap metal fund, he ordered enough lights to light the big Norway spruce at the club entrance. His local tree trimmer had to help, obviously, with a sky worker. When they were done the sheer size of the lighted tree was stupendous.

Dutch carefully place his sale lights around the grounds, and on the first night after Thanksgiving he turned them all on. Honestly, the sight was fantastic.

And so was the response from the Big Piney members. Their enthusiastic response only inspired Dutch to make an annual vow - "next year the Christmas display will be even better!"

Always working on a shoestring budget ("That's half the fun!" Dutch declared.), he let his imagination go. The only limits were his common sense.

The golf course had an old Aero windmill behind the first green. He outlined it with small twinkling lights one year. Groups of evergreens and deserving individual spruce and fir and pine were lighted, starting from the clubhouse and reaching out to the far ends of the course a couple of years later.

One of his most popular displays was the Ford 8N hitched to a set of Worthington Airfield Blitzers that he parked in front of the practice putting green. He dressed the rig with lights and put chasing lights on all four tractor tires and the tires of the rough mower. When the lit in sequence, it looked as though the wheels were turning!

Then there was his antique cutter he hitched to cutout reindeer that were "running" across the lawn. And kids loved the brightly lit figure of Santa Claus,

putting out on the 18th green. Dutch didn't miss a trick.

He mapped out a snowmobile trail on the course and led groups on a tour of the lights. His cousin, a farmer from Oneida county, hauled his team of horses up and hitched them to a sled. The rides were a popular part of Big Piney's Christmas party. And of course the hayrides during Christmas were filled as soon as the signup sheet was posted in the big house.


Recently people have started coming from miles away to drive around the perimeter of the golf course to see the best Christmas decorations of any golf course in America.

The electric bill got to be large enough that Dutch had to create a budget line for it. But the extra dining room business on those nights between Thanksgiving and Christmas more than offset the cost.

All in all, it was a wonderful community asset. The do-gooders had succeeded in taking the Christmas season out of the schools and this was Dutch's small

way of compensating for that. "It may seem a little old fashioned," Dutch remarked. "But so what. My Christmas lights have brought joy to lots of people, young and old. And that's a good thing."

"Merry Christmas, everybody!"

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