



After 50 Years at the Same Course, It Has Become a Part of Him

By Lori Ward Bocher

Ever wonder how Monroe decides who he'll feature in this Personality Profile column? Sometimes the ideas just fall in his lap, like the idea for this subject, retired superintendent Bill Kazda.

Early this year he opened a letter from Bill's daughter, Linda Thomas, who enclosed a copy of an article about her father that appeared in *The Lakeland Times*, a weekly newspaper in Minocqua. She thought that current superintendents might enjoy reading about someone who managed the same course, Plum Lake Golf Club near Sayner, for 50 years.

Ever wonder how I get the information I need to write about the people in this column? Usually I interview people over the telephone. But once in a while I'll meet them in person. When Monroe told me where Bill Kazda lived, I realized it was only 15 miles from where I'd be directing a church camp one week in June. "I'll do this interview in person," I volunteer. "It will do me good to get away from the 3rd and 4th graders for a few hours one day of the week."

And so on June 19, I pull away from the church camp in the solitude of my minivan and drive the short trip to Plum Lake to meet with the 83-year-old Bill. It is fitting to meet at the course since this is where he worked for 50 years of his life. As I turn the corner to drive down the hill to the club house, I am awed by the beauty of the 1923-era structure nestled on the shores of Plum Lake. It has that northwoods look, a large wooden-frame structure with a stone chimney and wrap-around screen porch.

I recognize Bill right away when I spot him in the parking lot. I could say he looked like a retired golf course superintendent. But the truth is I have a picture of him from the newspaper article his daughter had sent to Monroe. Bill is accompanied by his wife, June Ong. I would hear later the story of how Bill met and married her when he was 82 years old.

"This is a busy place," I comment as we shake hands and introduce ourselves.

"Ladies day," Bill explains. That becomes more apparent as we move into the club house and hear the familiar sound of a ladies' luncheon, spirited voices mingling with the clatter of dinnerware. Bill escorts me onto the wide screen porch that wraps around three sides of the club house. A perfect setting for a perfect day. We arrange three chairs in one corner, and I watch golfers return from and exit to the course as the interview progresses.

One of my first questions is: "I think my late uncle



Retired now, Bill Kazda cared for Plum Lake Golf Club for 50 years.

belonged to this club and was on the green committee. Did you know Ted Ward?"

"Yes, I did," he answers. "We played golf together many times." Small world.

A few minutes into the interview, the course pro, Scott Schenkenberg, spies Bill and comes over to greet him. "This course is what it is today because of this man," he boasts. "We wouldn't be here today if it weren't for Bill."

Why? Maybe it was the way Bill saved the course from the brink of closing back in the 1940s after years of neglect during World War II. Maybe it's because few other superintendents can claim that they've lovingly tended the same course for 50 years of their life. Let's start at the beginning to see how Bill became the man most associated with Plum Lake Golf Course.

Back to the past...

Bill was born in Schofield, Wisconsin and spent his formative years during the Great Depression. In 1934, at the age of 14, Bill took his first job at a golf course, the Wausau Country Club. "It was just a job," Bill recalls, adding that there was no special reason he became a caddy at the course. "Back in those days, everyone who golfed had a caddy."

Two years later he began helping the greenskeeper on what was then a 9-hole course. And soon he was named assistant greenskeeper. "I learned on the job," Bill points out. "Only had an 8th grade education, which was pretty common back then." Bill had a good teacher at Wausau - greenskeeper Otto Scheal, who was a charter member of the WGCSA.

In 1939 when Bill was 19 years old, he 'graduated' from Otto's course and went to work for Otto's brother, Ervin, as an assistant greenskeeper at Plum Lake Golf Course, a 9-hole course near Sayner. "He was planning to retire in a year, so I was hired with the idea of becoming the head greenskeeper in a year, which I did," Bill points out. Bill had two brothers in the area that had come up to Sayner to caddy at Plum Lake one summer and ended up staying for good.

In 1941, Bill married Irene Froelich, a native of Sayner. That same year he was drafted into the Army shortly before the attack on Pearl Harbor. It was goodbye to Plum Lake, goodbye to his new wife, and hello to the Army. After basic training, Bill was sent to the South Pacific, mainly Guadalcanal, where he served in the 147th Infantry Division.

"We slugged it out face to face with the enemy," Bill remembers. "I was never part of a beach hit, but we fought back in the brush. Our biggest enemy was malaria and mosquitoes." Bill injured his knee and left his unit to return stateside in 1944. He was discharged from the Army in September of 1945, nearly four years after first being drafted.

Back to Plum Lake...

In 1946, Bill moved back to Sayner to see what was left of Plum Lake Golf Course. "It was in pretty rough shape," he recalls. "During the war there was no one to work here and no one to golf here. They made hay on the golf course in 1944. When I arrived, two young boys had already done some mowing on the course, but that was it."

The owners didn't even know if they wanted to keep the course open. Plum Lake was started in 1912 by a group of summer home owners in the Sayner area. They were led by an insurance man from Chicago who had three sons who were avid golfers - one of whom was a U.S. Amateur champion one year.

"They got members from all over the country," Bill explains. "When they opened, members paid a fee and the resorts paid a fee so their guests could play the course. Later they turned semi-public. Today they still have at least 100 members."

But in 1946, things looked pretty bleak. The course was losing money because it had lost so many members during the war. It's safe to say that, had it not been for Bill, the course would have been another casualty of the war. "For the first three years I took care of the course by myself," he says. "I also had to collect fees on the course



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because we couldn't afford to hire anyone for the club house. We charged \$1 for nine holes in 1946."

Nursing the course back to shape was no easy task. There was no money for new equipment or fertilizer. All the watering was done by hand with hoses. And Bill was the only employee. But he persevered, and the course and its business came back to life.

How things have changed...

Bill witnessed many changes in golf course management during his 50 years on the course. For one thing, his title changed from greenskeeper to superintendent. In 1979 an automatic irrigation system was installed at the course which really helped keep things green. "Before that, a lot of the grass would be brown," Bill says.

Better fertilizers have helped Bill improve soil conditions at Plum Lake. "When I first came here, the soil was very acid," he recalls. "With today's fertilizers, you can get just what you need."

Mowers and mowing heights have evolved. "Riding mowers were the big things after I started here," Bill says. "One person could mow in half the time it took two of us to mow before. Today's new machines are super if you can afford them." The mowing height on the greens was 1/4-inch when Bill started in the business.

While the grass is shorter, the trees are taller. "There were hardly any trees when I first came here," Bill says.

"Now they're all grown up. It defines the course better."

The clientele at Plum Lake has also changed over the years. Now there are more local people playing at the course - not just the summer home owners - so hours have been extended to accommodate their schedules. And by the time Bill retired in 1990, there were three people working on the course and four people in the club house - a far cry from the days Bill did it all.

Golfers now have the option of playing at several larger courses in the area - courses that weren't there when Plum Lake opened in 1912 or reopened in 1946. But Plum Lake has its niche. "The appeal is that it's a unique, old course," Bill believes. "We still have the original greens. It's still a 9-hole course, although there have been two or three attempts to build another nine holes. In 2002 Plum Lake was voted best 9-hole course in Wisconsin."

How things have stayed the same...

The nine holes at Plum Lake never changed in Bill's 50 years there. Neither has the growing season. "It's such a short season. This hurts us," Bill says, the word 'us' showing that he stills considers himself part of Plum Lake. "A course needs to pay people all year to keep them, and that's more difficult when the season is short."

The northern course usually opens in early April for a few local people and play picks up more in May. "It was usually around Memorial Day when the course was ready

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Bill and his wife, June Ong, enjoy the view at Plum Lake Golf Club near Sayner.

to my satisfaction," Bill says. In the fall, the number of players dwindles as snowbirds return south, and the course closes sometime in October or early November.

Snow mold is another thing that hasn't changed. Bill dealt with it for years. "Gayle Worf conducted some snow mold experiments up here," Bill points out. Bill also recalls a time when someone told him he didn't need to use as many chemicals to prevent snow mold. "So we did an experiment and found out I was right. You never know, though. Another year it could have been different."

The Northern Great Lakes GCSA was just forming at the time Bill retired in 1990, so he never was a part of that group. But he did enjoy his association with the WGCSA. Except that some of the advice given at meetings didn't apply to northern courses. "The speakers would often say, 'Down south here we do it this way,' and that advice didn't apply to us up north," Bill points out.

Bill remembers traveling to WGCSA meetings and the turf conferences at Purdue University with his good friend, Walter Stepanik, the now-retired superintendent at Wausau Country Club. He also traveled a lot with Roger Raichle at Trout Lake Golf and Country Club.

Retired at age 70...

Bill retired as Plum Lake superintendent in 1985 at the age of 65. But he stayed on as a 'consultant' for another five years until a heart attack slowed him down in 1989. "That was the last summer I worked on the course," he says.

During his working years, Bill and his wife, Irene, raised two daughters. Linda Thomas now lives in Sayner, and Lorraine Medes lives in Eau Claire. "I didn't do too much in the community," Bill says. "This was a full-time job in the summertime. I took it easy in the winter." He

did, however, work as a volunteer fire fighter with the Plum Lake Townships.

Bill's wife, Irene, died in April of 2000. In November of 2002 he married June Ong of Eagle River; June runs the Lifeline program at the Eagle River hospital. "We had been going to the same church for a number of years and knew each other, but not well," Bill explains.

June joins in. "It all started when I offered to bring him a clean air machine because I thought it would help him to breathe better." Turns out his temporary breathing problems were caused by a medication mix up. Both feel that it was God's will that they got together.

Bill is modest about his retirement activities. But June won't let Bill sell himself short. "Bill volunteers his time helping friends and neighbors in Sayner," she says. "He always has time to help other people. For 10 years he's been on the board for the Commission on Aging for Vilas County. He delivers Meals on Wheels when needed."

Bill is also on the board of the Community Bible Church in Eagle River. And he plays golf every Tuesday in a senior men's league.

As the interview draws to a close, we walk up to the 9th green to take a few pictures. I ask Bill if this course is a part of him, a part of his psyche. "I bond with it," he answers. "And I think I've been lucky in having a lot of good people I've worked with here. I've had good boards to work with, too."

Bill, June and I depart with friendly goodbyes. We're all three glad that we had a chance to get to know each other - because Bill's daughter sent a letter to Monroe and because I just happened to be at a church camp 15 miles away. Life just happens that way sometimes. ♻

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