



A Late Spring Superintendent's Meeting

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

We decided to go to the April WGCSA meeting at the last minute. Both Tom Morris and I were up in the air about aerification and couldn't predict with any certainty that we'd be done by the meeting day.

Turns out we were. We'd deep-drilled our greens and the whole process was slick. Tom was able to "borrow" a second core harvester (actually, he scheduled a demo on the day he needed to pick the cores!) and with our top-dresser to help out, he was able to wrap the job up in record time.

"Let's go," I said when he called to ask about going to the meeting. He grouched about the \$10 late fee but I told him it was better than registering on time and then not being able to go. "You lose the whole amount when that happens," I pointed out. "Plus, you aren't paying for it out of your pocket anyway."

The meeting was in my favorite part of Wisconsin, down in the driftless southwest where the glacier hadn't gone through and smoothed the hills off. The valleys there were deep, the hills high and steep, and the visual beauty stunning. We were meeting at the Veterans Golf Club in Soldiers Grove.

Veterans is on a premier piece of property, playing up and down a couple of coulees and crossing the famed Kickapoo River in two places. It's an old course, built in 1920 and dedicated to the local boys who had given their lives in Europe a few years before. It was sporty and challenging and had hosted state events over the years.

Tom and I were going to see the

Wisconsin gang, most whom we hadn't seen since the Symposium in November or the Expo in January. The speaker was H. Walter Hodson, a golf course architect known for the courses he'd designed here in the upper Midwest.

"The forecast scares me a little," said Tom when he called me Sunday night to confirm. "The boys are going to get cold playing tomorrow and it sounds like there's a pretty good chance for precipitation of some sort."

The weather forecasts are wrong more often than they are correct, and if we don't go it will probably be warm and sunny, I told Tom. "Let's go."

So we did. It turned out to be a cold day with a lot of wind and a high probability of rain. Or snow. "If we get cancelled out, it is your fault," Tom said.

The grass was greener than you would ever think it could be. The hillsides were spotted with blooming *Prunus*, dogwood and forsythia. In the little towns along the way, spring bulbs were out and bright with reds and yellows and whites. And you could see the lilac buds were getting fat and ready to pop in ten days or so. The ride out from Madison to Soldiers Grove could not have given one a better feel for spring.

The lunch buffet was fabulous, which was too bad because Tom and I had stopped at the Hidden Meadows Creamery and bought a pound of ultra fresh cheese curds. In fact, the cheese maker had scooped them out of the 2000 gallon vat they were draining off. The curds were so squeaky and so good we ate all of them before we

got to Veterans Golf. So much for the buffet!

Hodson was an excellent speaker and he was anxious to get onto the course with the Wisconsin superintendents and play 18 holes. The crowd was surprisingly big, given the potential weather and the distant site. They headed out to tee assignments for the noon simuttee. Some light rain was just starting when Tom and I pulled out of the Veterans Golf Club.

"I hope this doesn't freeze on the road before we get home," said Tom. "Maybe we should cancel our side trips."

We had a couple of stops planned. There's a little bakery in Wilton that sells the best (and only) square pies in the world and we were each going to take one home. It was quite a ways out of the way, but we had the time. Tom had wanted to stop at a sawmill in Ontario and pick up some pieces of butternut lumber he needed for a woodworking project.

I offered to pass on the square pies because of the obvious: at our ages we didn't need cheese curds AND square rhubarb or pumpkin pies. But the lumber was something else. I was sure the mill was an Amish operation and told Tom the lumber would undoubtedly be of excellent quality at a fair price.

He agreed on both counts, so we headed for the mill on our way out of Soldiers Grove.

As we feared, the precipitation turned to snow. "A four-wheel drive vehicle does better in snow than it does on ice," Tom said. He was supremely confident in his Ford F-250 4X4.

The snow really picked up and in no time the landscape was under a blanket of white. The road was covered, too and the travel was becoming a little dicey. "How often is a tournament ever cancelled because of snow?" I asked Tom, suspecting that the WGCSA outing had broken up by now.

"Unless they have some red or orange or green golf balls, they cannot possibly be still playing," he added.

We took a short cut - a county road - that appeared from our Wisconsin gazetteer to cut off quite a few miles. The trouble was we had no idea how steep the climbs up and rolls down were going to be. It was a mistake.

We passed by a number of small farms, all with relatively small dairy herds and a number of horses. "I'll bet they are Amish," I mused as Tom navigated the winding road that was becoming increasingly difficult to maneuver.

"When this dead ends at the next intersection, turn left," I told Tom. "Your sawmill should only be a short distance from there, on the right." With that, the truck slid and in the blink of an eye, it was at a right angle to the road and in the ditch on the driver's side. The ditch was steep and the truck was hung up. The snow didn't help, but even in normal circumstances, we wouldn't have been able to drive out, 4X4 notwithstanding.

"Damn it," said the normally even-tempered Morris. "Now we will have to get help to get out of here."

"Our best bet will be to walk back to that last farm and see if he can pull us out. It will probably be with a team of horses," I said, stating the obvious.

"Just great." Tom was upset, and the snow was coming down in blizzard proportions.

We weren't dressed for winter weather, but it wasn't terribly

cold. Our biggest problem was trying to climb out of the ditch with dress shoes on. We finally went parallel to the road for a couple of hundred years until the slope flattened out.

We trudged on the skinny shoulder of the road for a mile or so until we reached the driveway of the farm we had just passed. The snow, although wet and heavy, was starting to drift and we were having a devil of a time walking in it.

Finally we got to the buildings and went up to the house. I knocked on the door and a middle aged lady answered, with a surprised look on her face.

She was Amish as we'd expected. She had a thin white bonnet covering her head, her hair was done up in a bun, and she wasn't wearing any shoes. The house was nice and warm and it smelled good, a mixture of wood smoke and good cooking. The house was sparse - uncovered wood floors, little furniture and

dim light. But it was shelter and felt good to the both of us.

We were standing in a vestibule, soaking wet and dripping on the floor. "Come in," the gal said quietly and politely. "Go get Papa," she instructed a little guy who was staring at us. "He's in the barn."

In a few minutes he was in the house. We introduced ourselves and explained our dilemma to him. "I'm Matthew," he offered as he extended his hand to shake.

"We were hoping you could pull us out of the ditch so we can get home," Tom explained. "We want to pay you, of course."

"You had better plan on spending the night here. That snow is getting heavier and even if we get you out of the ditch you will probably slide back in somewhere else before you get far. The township plow will be through by morning. Then we'll get the team of horses to pull you back onto the road." Matthew made sense, even though I could tell Tom

The Wisconsin Turfgrass Association Field Day will be Tuesday, July 27, 2004

More detailed information will be mailed as the date gets closer.

July 27, 2004
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wasn't liking the thought of spending the night with strangers. I wasn't either.

Matthew's wife's name was Sarah. She was rustling around to get some dry clothes for us. They were work clothes, clean but too big for me and too small for Tom Morris. But at that point dry clothes were what we needed.

"If we stay here," Tom whispered to me with worry in his voice, "what am I supposed to wear to bed?"

"You have two choices - nothing, or what you have on now," I replied with a grin. "I'm wearing what I have on."

"I'm a former farm kid," I told Matthew, "from a farm less than 60 miles from here. Maybe I can help you milk tonight."

"You can sure watch if you want to."

Other children came in a various times from school, an Amish school. There were six of them.

What an education that evening turned out to be. We had supper. There was electricity in the house, but no TV, radio or electronic games. The kids did homework and we adults visited.

Matthew was more open than I would have imagined and willing to educate us about the Amish. The settlement in this part of Wisconsin had come from Lancaster and Chester counties in Pennsylvania. Wisconsin has what the Amish want, Matthew told us: rich land and cheap prices. "We can buy land in Wisconsin for \$1,000 - \$2,000 an acre whereas in Pennsylvania it costs more in the \$10,000 - \$15,000 an acre. That is just too much money considering the price of agricultural commodities."

"The Amish are outgrowing Lancaster county," Matthew said. His ancestors first settled in America in the 1700s from Germany. They speak a blend of English and the German dialect

called Pennsylvania Dutch.

The Pennsylvania colonies of Amish have grown enormously in the last 100 years - 30 times larger and it doubled in the last 20 years. "We had to move if my sons are going to have a chance to farm," Matthew explained.

The large settlements include places in Indiana and Ohio, but Wisconsin's Amish population is growing fast. They are settled in 28 states and Canada these days.

"Amish are primarily farmers," Matthew continued, "because farming is the best way to maintain the traditional values important to us. We are culturally and religiously conservative. Our families are strong and we believe that modern life and ways lead to family disruption. Our work is mostly farming, but some work off farm in carpentry and furniture making."

Tom and I crashed on a couch and on a thin mattress on the floor. They weren't comfortable but we were tired and didn't stir until the family was up for morning chores. There would be no school this day.

Matthew took a team down to Tom's truck and with some four-

wheel drive assist, the horses had us back on the road in short order. And the snowplow had gone through, making the trip home pretty easy. The sun was out and the temperature warmed quickly. The snow was melting fast.

We both talked constantly on the way home about our time with the Amish. Our respect for them had grown tremendously. As Tom said, they aren't building any prisons for Amish youth. The Amish are the first to respond to emergencies like storms or other weather disasters. And in the small Wisconsin communities, they serve on volunteer fire departments.

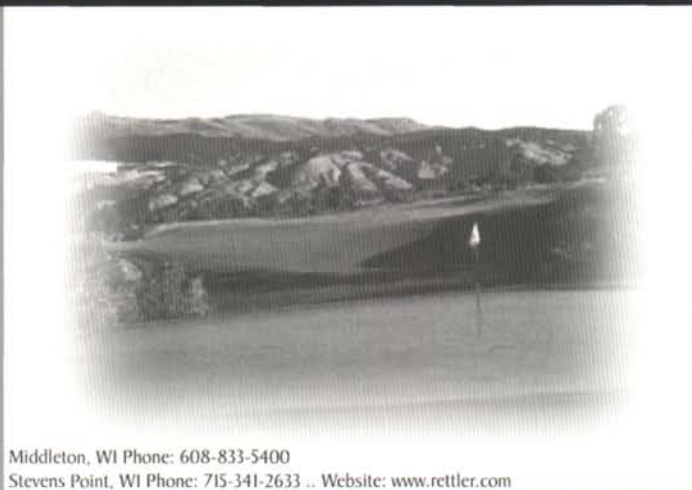
And they are preserving Wisconsin's agricultural past, which we are in danger of losing as farmers either get bigger or leave the farm.

It was quiet in the truck for a few miles as we neared home. Tom broke the silence with, "I wonder if they play golf?"

Somehow, we figured it would be a few more years before they accepted golf into their lives. They seemed pretty well satisfied with checkers. ♣

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