



An Early Christmas

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

It started with a call from Scott Neary in late November. He invited me to attend a Green Bay packer game on December 10th. I was gone when the call came; Chad Grimm related the message to me a short time later.

Cheryl and I had Packer season tickets for 25 years. We gave them up because more and more games had been scheduled for December. The travel could be dicey and the weather miserable and, at our age, those factors took a lot of fun out of it.

But before I could say anything, Chad said, "the game is in San Francisco."

Who could decline an invitation like that?! Aside from some major family event, a long December weekend in California doesn't come one's way very often (or ever!).

Scott had achieved a Reinders' sales goal and could invite three of his customers. He chose Mark Schwarting, Andrew Putzer and myself. We were all overwhelmed.

We left Milwaukee early on Friday and had an uneventful trip to California, arriving before noon. We stayed at the Tuscan Inn Best Western Hotel. Hundreds of other Packer fans were there also, so we felt right at home. The hotel was a couple of blocks from Fisherman's Wharf and the piers associated with it.

I had been to San Francisco a few other times, for GCSAA conferences twice and on a trip another time. Although I had made brief stops at the wharf area, this trip gave me the chance to really spend the time to leisurely look around. It comes down to this - the Fisherman's Wharf is best known for its seafood - great seafood. Yes, Ghirardelli Square is



A cyclist's view of San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge.



Alcatraz is clearly seen from Fisherman's Wharf.



San Francisco is clearly a city of significant grade changes!

there (great chocolate), the National Maritime Museum, and a number of other pedestrian sites. But the outstanding and affordable and fresh seafood tops all else. We looked all around that area that Friday afternoon.

Saturday was a free day, left open in case of travel troubles on Friday. Alcatraz Island was out as an option - transportation strike - so Scott and Mark rented bikes and rode across the Golden Gate Bridge, past Sausalito and around to the north side of San Francisco Bay. Andrew spent time with a good friend who had moved from Oshkosh to California in a career move.

I went for a daylong walk - a long day and a long walk. The hotel was only a few blocks from Columbus Avenue, which runs from Fisherman's Wharf to the heart of the financial district where the Transamerica Pyramid building is located. The street goes right past Washington Square and I took the opportunity to stop at the twin-spired Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul. I sat quietly for a bit, resting and enjoying the kind of architecture only found in huge churches like this one. The park at Washington Square was packed with Santa Clauses, a sure sign that Christmas was near.

A couple of blocks from the park, on the opposite side of the street, is the City Lights Bookstore. People my age lived through the “beat generation” and know of Jack Kerouac’s books, the Grateful Dead’s music and Allen Ginsberg’s antics. Much of it centered in and around City Lights and it was “cool” to visit the place and imagine the people of that time in the 1950s and 1960s.

Columbus Avenue took me through the Italian part of town and past the Stinking Garlic Restaurant. It goes from there right through the heart of Chinatown. I visited the Old St. Mary’s Cathedral, the first Catholic Cathedral on the West Coast. Before that I had walked through the Church of St. Francis of Assisi, which was the first Catholic Church in California (1849) after the Spanish missions.

A few blocks on past the formal gated entrance to Chinatown is Market Street. I crossed it and walked two blocks to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Certainly, it is not like the MOMA in New York City, but it was a great place to spend some time. I wandered over to the Moscone Convention Center where we had our GCSAA conferences, walked past the Marriott and headed uphill to Union Square.

Of course, a Midwesterner thinks only of cold and snow at Christmas time, but the season was in full bloom at Union Square, despite the warm and almost balmy temperatures. It was fun relaxing in the park and people watching. Along the way I found several other bookstores of interest.

I took a bit of a different route back to the Tuscan Inn, arriving in time to greet the guys, enjoy happy hour and decide on a place to eat dinner. It was Mark who suggested John’s Grill, a well-established downtown restaurant. It was raining pretty good so we took a cab to get there – that and the fact that I had walked past it during the afternoon

and was too tired to walk it again.

John’s Grill has been in San Francisco since 1908 and is one of those places where the famous find time to visit and dine. The walls are covered – all three floors of dining – with autographed pictures of their famous patrons. John’s Grill was also a setting in author Dashiell

Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon*. The black falcon is in a display on the second floor.

Of course, the real reason we were there was to see the Packers/49ers game. We arrived at Monster Park early because we were given passes to an alumni party. Monster Park is today’s name for



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San Francisco is clearly a city of significant grade changes!



Monster Park is better known to my generation as Candlestick Park.

Candlestick Park. Bonds hasn't hit any steroid home runs there since 2000 when the Giants moved to a new stadium nearer to downtown.

Frankly, I was surprised at how rundown and tacky the stadium was, certainly nowhere nearly the quality of Lambeau Field or Camp Randall. It lacked even basic maintenance, to say the least. The field itself was pretty good, despite a fair amount of rain over the previous couple of days.

Some well known older players were at the alumni party. I was most pleased to meet R.C. (Alley-Oop) Owens and Steve Bono.

Best of all, the Packers won the game handily. It was part of a great final four games of the season for Green Bay; the Niners didn't have a chance against Brett that day.

We bused back to the hotel, walked to Fisherman's Wharf for some final seafood before our flight back on Monday.

An interesting sidelight was seeing the well-known entertainer Gallagher in the hotel lobby. He was in town for a show, and Scott introduced himself and had his picture taken with the great comedian.

The flight home started early and ended in Chicago because of fog and winter weather in Milwaukee. We drove the final leg, left our names for the luggage that would arrive on Tuesday and drove to our homes. It was late, but who cared?

After all, it was a terrific Christmas present that likely won't be matched for a long, long time.



It wouldn't have been difficult buying a ticket to a 49ers game, clearly a different situation than in Green Bay. There were a lot of empty seats.



Gallagher had a chance to meet one of his best fans - Scott Neary!

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