



Monroe Miller

By David Brandenburg, Golf Course Manager, Rolling Meadows Golf Course

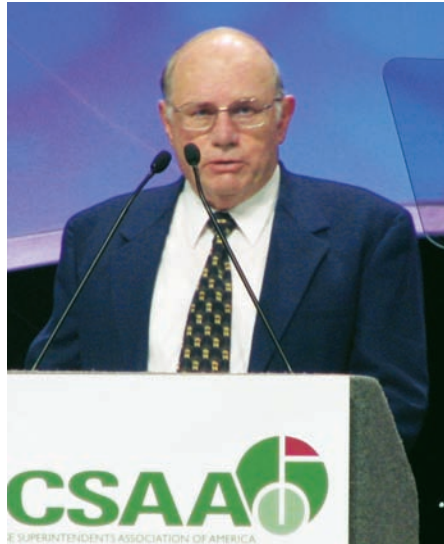
Where do you start when you are covering the career and life of Monroe Miller? The guy is an icon in the industry. Dr. Wayne Kussow said it best at the Symposium when he said Monroe is loyal to Family, God, Country, Industry and Alma Matter. Everything else about Monroe comes from that statement. Monroe and I were talking a few years ago about what made some WGCSA leaders stand out more than others was the fact some “did what needed doing”. Monroe has been doing that for his entire life and in so many ways for so many people.

I spent a couple hours with Monroe this month to gather information for this article and selfishly see his library and tractor collection. It was the fastest two hours imaginable as we covered a wide range of topics and events. He is humble as always and so deserving of the many awards he has achieved. (And yes, the library and tractor collection are better than you can imagine.)

HISTORY -

Born in 1946 to Frank and Virginia Miller, Monroe was raised on a farm in southwest WI near Fennimore. In the March/April 2004 issue of *The Grass Roots* Lori Ward Bocher wrote, In spite of everything beneficial he's done for the golf and turf industries, that's not how Monroe sees himself. “If someone asked me, ‘What single phrase identifies you the best?’ I wouldn't say I'm a golf course superintendent. I wouldn't say I'm a Wisconsin grad or anything else. I'd say the thing that I'm most proud of. *I'm a farm kid.*”

When Monroe graduated from



Monroe gives his speech after receiving the GCSAA Colonel John Morley Distinguished Service Award in New Orleans.

high school in 1964 he was not sure what he wanted to do, but he points out. “I just knew I didn't want to milk cows.” While enrolled at the University of Wisconsin Madison he tried a surveying course in engineering and decided he did not like it but he did like his soils course with Dr. J.R. Love. When Dr. Love made an announcement in class about a job at Nakoma Golf Course, Monroe said he was interested and Dr. Love drove him out to meet the superintendent.

With that act Monroe was in the golf business. Monroe is quoted as saying, “After my first day of working there that summer, I knew that's what I wanted to do. It had machinery. I worked outside. There was a physical aspect to the job. I could see in a short period of time that is was the perfect compromise for me - similar to working on a farm, but I didn't have to deal with Holsteins.”

When Monroe received his Bachelors from UW-Madison in 1968 he planned to attend graduate school, but Uncle Sam drafted him into the Army. That was the middle of the Vietnam Conflict and Miller was shipped to Fort Gordon, Georgia for MP training before leaving for Vietnam in July of 1969. It is clear in my conversations with Monroe, Vietnam was a duty he preformed but he would have skipped it if he could as most would have. The experience of war allowed Miller to appreciate life stateside as he commented that his worst day at work in 36 years at Blackhawk Country Club could not compare to the horrible events going on everyday in Vietnam.

Upon his return home in October of 1970, Dr. Love already had Monroe registered for graduate school. Miller worked on his Masters through 1972 but greater opportunities were offered to him before he could finish his thesis to complete the degree. Blackhawk Country Club was looking for a new superintendent to take over their course and in the club officials conversations with Dr. Love they stated they needed a “educated” superintendent like Jerry O'Donnell at Nakoma. Considering Monroe had worked for Jerry and had 6 years of schooling he quickly became a top candidate for the position. With a growing family, Monroe was happy to take Blackhawks position when it was offered to him.

Monroe and I discussed how the game has changed in his tenure and how the current economic challenges will effect the private club market. Monroe pointed out how labor intensive golf course



Monroe receives the WGCSA Distinguished Service Award in 1989

maintenance has become, often because of our own acts. Superintendents choose to make improvements and spend money because it was available and the boards wanted to improve. Miller talked of the switch from gangs and big tractors on fairways to the triplexes like the Greensking and Ransomes 180s. Looking back a lot of the changes were foolish he expressed and now members need to realize we can cut back and become more efficient.

After 36 years at Blackhawk Country Club, Monroe retired on December 31, 2008 after one of the more successful careers in Wisconsin golf history.

VOLUNTERISM

Monroe gives of himself for the activities and organizations he believes in. He has stayed active at his Alma Matter through committee service to the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS). Through his persistence and many contacts, Monroe has been a key player in getting vacant turf professor positions filled by qualified candidates and making sure the Dean of CALS and other university leaders know the importance of the Wisconsin Turf Industry. I am not saying Monroe is



The 25 year member class of 1997, John Krutilla, Chuck Frazier, Don Ferger, Monroe Miller.



1986 WGCSA Directors and Officers, Randy Smith, Bruce Worzella, Monroe Miller, Bill Roberts, Carl Grassel, Roger Bell, Dale Marach, Rodney Johnson.

old, but he grew up with Dr. Love, saw Dr. Kussow's entire career at UW's Soil Department and ensured the industry will continue in good hands as the job transferred to Dr. Doug Soldat.

His active work with the university led to his co-founding the Wisconsin Turfgrass Association (WTA) to promote turf research by the universities professors. Through his involvement and leadership the WTA has accomplished two goals that set the UW Madison apart from other turf programs. Monroe spearheaded a campaign to raise \$250,000 to obtain a \$100,000

match for the University of Wisconsin field turfgrass research facility.

The O.J Noer Research Facility was completed in 1991 with Monroe and his group of leaders overseeing construction the entire way. Building the facility was not enough so Monroe led an effort to raise \$1 million to be matched and invested by the Wisconsin Research Foundation. Those funds will generate enough interest to annually support four graduate research fellowships.

Monroe is continuing his volunteering for the WTA as he recently

began serving as the associations first Ambassador. Miller wants to reach out to the WTA members and non-members to promote the association, build relationships and guarantee the WTA succeeds into the future.

Monroe helped the UW and his golf course by mentoring many students. Dr. Wayne Kussow, Professor Emeritus, UW Wisconsin Department of Soil Science, observed a few years ago that of the 200 graduates of the UW-Madison Turf Program over half have worked for Monroe and benefited from his leadership. Taking on turf students is a two way street. It provides Blackhawk CC employees who have an interest in the turf business but it also takes a lot more time to teach an employee the business than to just teach someone how to mow greens and pickup sticks. Given how many of Monroe's former student employees have been successful in the green industry it is clear he taught them quite well.

Monroe has been a supporter of GCSAA and the changes the national association has seen over the years but never blindly so. He was not afraid to benefit the association by providing criticism of policies and programs that did not benefit the average golf course superintendent.

Monroe was a key figure in getting Wisconsin's Bill Roberts elected to the GCSAA Board of Directors and although he would have been a great candidate himself, Monroe choose to help the association through committee service rather than higher office.

It is not enough to say Miller was a volunteer for the Wisconsin Golf Course Superintendents Association. For many members through his selfless outreach as editor of *The Grass Roots* for 24 years Monroe was the WGCSA. Even today *The Grass Roots* is the only contact many of the

Nakoma Golf Club - 1967-1969 summer worker

University of Wisconsin - Madison - B.S. in Soil Science 1968

United States Army - July 1969 to October 1970

College of Agriculture and Life Sciences - Teaching Assistant 1972

Maple Bluff Country Club 1973

Blackhawk Country Club, Golf Course Superintendent 36 years

WGCSA President 1984-1985

WGCSA Editor, *The Grass Roots* - 24 years

WGCSA Distinguished Service Award - 1989

WTA - Co-Founder, Past President

WTA - 1st Executive / Ambassador 2009

WTA - O.J. Noer Research Center - Fundraiser, Co-Founder

UW College of Agriculture and Life Sciences - Honorary Recognition Award

USGA Green Section Award - 2004

USGA Green Section Committee member

WSGA Hall of Fame - 2005

GCSAA - Best content in a chapter publication for unpaid editor - 19 years

GCSAA - Colonel John Morley - Distinguished Service Award - 2009

College of Agriculture and Life Sciences Board of Visitors - Emeritus Member

Wisconsin Agricultural and Life Sciences Alumni Association - Past President

Club Managers Association - Badger Chapter, Lifetime Achievement Award - 2008

associations 450+ members have with the group.

As the WGCSA President in 1984 and 1985 Monroe took the association to a new level of organization, communication and camaraderie leading him to receive the associations coveted Distinguished Service Award in 1989.

Writing was an enjoyable hobby for Monroe who admitted he used to diagram sentences for fun and loved english class in school. This allowed his transition as editor of *The Grass Roots* to be a natural fit for him. Monroe took the chapter publication to a new level and beyond. He won the best content

award from GCSAA for a publication with a unpaid editor a unprecedented 19 years. They have since stopped giving the chapter publication awards, more than likely because they knew who the winner would be so why bother!

It is because of Monroe's dedication to the WGCSA through his work with *The Grass Roots* the board has created the Monroe Miller Literary Scholarship. This award will be given annually on the basis of student contributions to *The Grass Roots*.

GOLF WITHOUT CLUBS

It is common to wonder how Monroe could be successful in the



Monroe and Cheryl Miller

golf industry when he did not play the game. Monroe admitted he played golf in high school with his friends when he had time off the farm and he enjoyed it. He loves the game but expresses he can go on a golf trip without clubs.

Monroe enjoys the people of the game, the players, the keepers of the green and the personalities of the game such as Arnold Palmer his favorite player whom he had a chance to meet one day when he stopped in at Bay Hill.

Miller also enjoys the history of the game and has a great knowledge of not only Wisconsin's golf history but throughout the country as well. From reading Monroe's articles over the years it is clear with every trip he took he made sure to visit the areas key clubs and learn about their history and people.

As a writer Monroe also enjoys the literature of the game of golf. His library bookshelves contain numerous books from golf's great writers such as Herbert Warren Wind, who Monroe and Cheryl not only met while on a trip out east a few years ago but become friends with. So you may never see Monroe lugging a set of clubs up the fairway, but he enjoys the "game" as much as anyone could.

RETIREMENT

With the commitment Monroe has given the industry and Blackhawk Country Club over his career I wondered how he could retire. Retirement is easy until you are the one doing it. Often the retiree starts to get cold feet when that last day of work gets closer. They wonder, what will work do without me and what will I do without work?

It is clear from our conversation, Monroe has planned for retirement for a long time and looks forward to the rewards it will bring. Rather than a rest period after a career, Miller looks at retirement as an opportunity. An opportunity to do the many things he

could not do while working and serving numerous committees and organizations.

He and Cheryl plan to travel quite a bit and to spend time with his three daughters, Amy, Holly and Christine while perhaps spoiling some grandkids.

He has a goal of visiting the grave site and if available the presidential library of every US President and only has 4 to go. (Minus the one presidential library he will not go to as he disagrees with the man.) If you have read any of Monroe's articles on travel to a conference or family trip you might wonder how he ever gets anywhere with all the historically significant places he stops to see. His passion for history and learning was clear as we talked in his library surrounded by enough books to keep him busy a few decades.

Miller's hobbies include repairing antique radios, his amazing tractor collection, and as expected collecting books on many subjects.

The WGCSA may never have another Monroe Miller, but we will continue to succeed from the hard work and the time he gave to our industry and association.

IN THEIR WORDS -

Stan Zontek, Director, USGA Mid-Atlantic Green Section

As I'm sure everyone is aware, Monroe is a post recipient of the USGA Green Section Award. In this regard, I could detail a long list of Monroe's accomplishments that resulted in his receiving our award. I will leave that to others. Rather, I would like to say a few words about Monroe Miller, the golf course superintendent and Monroe Miller, the person.

I remember well the first time I met Monroe. It was in spring on 1980. I had just been transferred from our New England region to the North Central Green Section region. It was all new to me, turf management in this part of the country. Monroe absolutely made me feel at ease. We talked about many aspects of his golf course and ways to make it better. He accented the positive...a fresh set of to make his golf course better. Following this and subsequent Green Section visits, I began to realize that Monroe was absolutely sincere in his quest to make Black Hawk Country Club the very best it could be. It was gratifying to be part of his team to try and achieve that goal.

Our industry was in transition...the old ways were giving way to such things as lightweight mowing of fairways, the use of plant protectant chemicals on areas of the golf course other than the greens and tees, in an overall goal to make golf courses...look better and also play better. He achieved those goals. I also began to "know" Monroe



Monroe Miller and Randy Smith Receive \$300 GCSAA Scholarships in 1968.



Monroe Miller and Tom Harrison with a \$4,000 donation to the WTA in 1985.

Miller as a person. It has always been said (in areas outside the Mid-West) that the nicest people in the USA are from... the Mid-West. It is a fact. Monroe was genuinely a nice person and I was humbled to be his friend.

Monroe Miller is also another person. He is a gifted writer. To look at Monroe, you would not believe that to be possible!!! He is so quite and unassuming. However, when he used to get behind that typewriter (remember, those were the good ole days) what flowed was...magic.

I absolutely believe Monroe Miller is the best writer of nay golf course superintendent that I have ever known. I have known many. His talents made, "The Grass Roots" the best monthly superintendent's magazine in the USA if not, the world This is not an idle compliment. I receive dozens of newsletters each month and, and the best one is your magazine.

Also, one of my greatest surprises was giving a speech at the Penn State Turf Conference and...there was Monroe Miller sitting in the front row. His reason...to see how other turf conferences do their work. Also, he wanted to travel through northern Pennsylvania and into New England...to enjoy the color of the fall foliage. Monroe had that ability to balance the professional as well as the personal aspects of our jobs. This was before Penn State joined the Big 10. Thus, he got out of Penn State alive. Just kidding.

In all honesty, I could ramble on for pages. However, Monroe would criticize me for being wordy and not succinct. I can hear it now, "Stanley you could have said this with fewer words." Thus, I need to end this letter. I don't want Monroe to say bad things about my writing talents.

Monroe Miller is one of those special people we all meet in the course of our lives and, we are all better for it.

Dr. Wayne Kussow, Retired Department of Soil Science, University of Wisconsin -Madison

During my nearly 25 year association with Monroe I, like everyone else, came to have tremendous respect for him. He is a person with unsurpassed loyalty and devotion to his family, job, alma mater, and profession. Without his dedication, the sharing of expertise, futuristic vision, encouragement and drive, the turf-grass education and research programs at the University of Wisconsin would be greatly diminished from what they are today. He has literally bettered the lives of hundreds of people - from students to faculty members to everyone in his profession.

On the more personal side, Monroe is a dear friend to the many who have been the recipients of his sage advise, mentoring and thoughtfulness. He has left me with a collection of memories and memorabilia that will be treasured forever.

Dr. Gayle Worf, Retired, Department of Pathology, University of Wisconsin - Madison

I don't recall the first time I met Monroe Miller. That seems surprising, because he has always made an impression on me with his presence. But upon further reflection, maybe it isn't so puzzling. He was typically a thinker and a doer; not a table thumper or a noise maker. That was obvious to all of us who came to know him over the years, but I could really see it in his relationship with the College. While Jim Love and others were making their contribution to the turf industry, Monroe was not satisfied with how much was going on. He was a proud alum, just as his father before him. But he felt it was short changing the big part of agriculture he represented. I never heard him say so - I just sensed it. And rather than just sit back and fuss about it, he began a slow, deliberate process to bring about change. There were others of you who were involved. He was

not alone. But his quiet, organized, steady and persistent efforts and attention to detail were evident when he met many times with the Dean and helped rally colleagues in the industry.

It didn't hurt that he was an artist with his second craft - painting with words!

In my mind the O.J. Noer Research facility may never have occurred without Monroe, for instance. Is it true that the pen is mightier than the sword? We know how he elevated The Grass Roots to new heights. I confess, though, that sometimes I hated his call for another article, not because I minded such - I simply was out of fresh ideas. Never mind, Monroe always had some to share! But he wanted substance, not fluff.

It took a while, but his value eventually was recognized and manifested when he was awarded Honorary Recognition by the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences - its most esteemed accolade. He was also appointed to the Dean's Advisory Committee, which is composed of the greatest agricultural minds available in the state and region, and where he could continue to provide valuable insight for turf as well as the whole of agriculture. He made other valuable contributions I won't bother to mention. We were fortunate that Monroe came along when he was urgently needed - we all agree, I'm sure, that he made a huge difference!

Dr. Frank Rossi, Associate Professor of Turfgrass Science, Cornell University

Thoughtful

If I had to find one word to describe the most important characteristic of the best golf course superintendents I know it would be thoughtful. I firmly believe if we are thinking about what we do, there is a fairly good

chance we will do it well.

Monroe is the most thoughtful superintendent I have ever known. Most of us know that this thoughtfulness goes WAY beyond his life as golf course superintendent. He has been a thoughtful friend, buying my wife and I a lovely personally engraved crock; a thoughtful mentor, helping me become a better writer; and a thoughtful confidant, listening to my fears, hopes and dreams many times in his office during my UW days.

Monroe, likely without knowing has mentored many a young "Prof" at UW. I always felt lucky to have been able to spend time in his office. I would have liked to spend more time with him and our friend, Wayne Otto. These two guys with Harrison and Quast helped shape what we all benefit from today.

This industry, especially the UW community, will miss

Monroe. I am proud to be counted among his friends and only hope I can be as thoughtful to my students and colleagues as Monroe has been

Rich Anderson, Reinders Inc.

There were several of us over the years that had the opportunity to call on Monroe with our distributor Reinders. We all looked forward to calling on Monroe. We knew we had to continually earn his business, but he was fair and you knew exactly where you stood with Monroe and Blackhawk CC. He was a very astute buyer, and was a great steward of the club's dollars. Monroe was great about separating business from the common bond and friendship of our industry. It is people like Monroe Miller who make this industry of ours a great one. All of us at Toro consider him a friend.

Congratulations Monroe! 🌱



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