

From Taking Pictures, to Creating Picture-Perfect Turf



By Lori Ward Bocher

He's not a golf course superintendent, but you've seen him at many of your meetings; at 70, he's still eager to learn. Maybe you've heard him speak; he believes strongly in colleagues sharing information – so strongly that he's helped form several organizations in his industry.

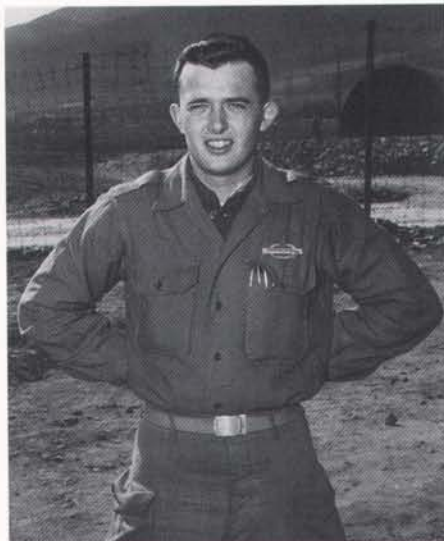
And maybe, if you stop to think about it, you thought the photos he used to accompany his talk were pretty darn good. Well, that's because he studied to become a photographer. He was an Army photographer during the Korean War, capturing on film the likes of U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower, French President Charles de Gaulle and Republic of Korea President Syngman Rhee – plus a few USO show girls like Marilyn Monroe and Debbie Reynolds.

And just who is this photographer turned landscaper? Roy Zehren, owner of Natural Athletic Turf, Inc., out of Mequon. Instead of taking pictures for a living, he makes picture-perfect athletic fields and consults others on how to do the same.

Start at the beginning...

Roy, who was born in Milwaukee in 1930, admits that landscaping is in his blood. "My father was a landscaper – one of the first in Wisconsin," he explains. "And I had five uncles in the business. At one time there were four or five Zehren landscape businesses under different names.

"I remember putting in my first lawn – where I actually did the seeding and everything – when I was 10 years old," he continues. But he didn't really care for the business that much. So shortly



after graduating from high school in 1948, he studied at the Layton Art Academy (now the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design) and Milwaukee Area Technical College where he received a degree in photography.

"Then I was drafted during the Korean War," he relates. "I started out as an infantryman but ended up as a photographer and correspondent for the Army Signal Corps." This is the division that does all of the public relations work for the Army, supplying photographs and articles to publications, among other things.

"I really got a lot of exposure in that job," Roy recalls. "In fact, I was one of the few people who was allowed to photograph President Eisenhower, President De Gaulle and Korean President Rhee. These are the photos I'm most proud of. Not many people can say they did that."

He had many other interesting assignments during his years with the Signal Corps. He escorted



Time-Life photographers all over the front line and did some freelance work himself for Time-Life. He became the personal photographer of one of the generals. He spent two months with the French

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battalion and two months with the British battalion. He shot stars like Marilyn Monroe and Debbie Reynolds who appeared in USO shows.

(By the way, Roy plans to donate his Korean War photos to the Wisconsin State Historical Society's Veterans Museum.)

Back to the U.S....

When the war ended, Roy came back to Milwaukee. "I wanted to get a job in photography at the Milwaukee Journal or someplace else, but they said I didn't have enough experience," he recalls. So he did what he knew second best: "I became a landscaper. In the middle of 1954 I started Zehren Landscape Company."

He decided not to go in business with his father. "I've really never worked for anybody else in my

life," he points out. "I've always owned my own businesses." His father, who never wanted him to go to art school and study photography in the first place, helped him get started in his second career as a landscaper.

"I remember saying to him, 'Dad, I'm going into landscaping. But I have no tools, no nothing,'" Roy recalls. "He gave me a wheel barrow, a shovel, and some other basic tools. But two days later I got a bill from him for the tools. Dad said, 'If you're going to be a successful businessman, you've got to know there are expenses.'"

Roy worked out of his car that first year. He did residential work at first, then some commercial work and a few athletic fields as his business grew. "In 1960 I bought out my father," he says.

"Between 1962 and 1970 most of my uncles retired. By 1970 there were only two of us left in landscaping – one uncle and myself."

The move toward athletic fields...

In the early 1970s, Roy had the good fortune of meeting Dr. Bill Daniel from Purdue University. "He invented the PAT system – Prescription Athletic Turf," Roy explains. "I got to know him, he got to know me. In 1974, when the first PAT football fields were built in North America, I was picked as a general contractor. I built the first PAT field in 1974, Engleman Field at UW-Milwaukee. That was a test plot for Camp Randall in Madison because they wanted to use it there. But Camp Randall ended up getting new artificial turf instead."



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Roy formed a new company in 1974, Natural Athletic Turf, for the building of athletic fields. He ran this company along with his landscaping business. "But sports turf got to be more and more of my business, and landscaping less and less," Roy says. "So in 1993 I terminated Zehren Landscape. From '93 on it's just been Natural Athletic Turf.

"I think we're the only company, at least in Wisconsin, that does sports turf exclusively and full time," he continues, adding that in a typical year they may put in 30 to 35 baseball diamonds, one or two football stadium fields, four or five football practice fields, half a dozen soccer fields, and new greens and tees on golf courses. "Some of these we build from the ground up. Others we rebuild or renovate extensively."

Roy estimates that he's worked on about 20 golf courses so far. "I tell you what. I like to build them, but I couldn't maintain them like you superintendents do," he says. "That's another world. I'll build them, you take care of them. I don't think I'd like to get up every day and be in the same place. I like to move around more."

Business grows, evolves...

After using the PAT system for several years, Roy invented his own "sand system" for playing fields. "My pride and joy is having done Marquette University's Valleylands playing fields in 1993," he adds. "Their soccer fields are still in my system."

Natural Athletic Turf employs eight to ten people in the summer and three or four during the winter. They usually work within a few hundred miles of Milwaukee, mostly for colleges, universities, public school districts, cities, villages and private sports organizations.

At the age of 70, Roy isn't cutting back just yet. "We get so many calls and so many chances to do more fields," he says. "I'm healthy

and feel like I'm 55, so why quit? We just keep doing as many as we can. Some years we do more, some less. Some years we do more golf work, some years more diamonds. It's never the same. This is going to be my 48th year in the business. Each year it gets a little better.

"I get to travel all over the United States," Roy continues. "I don't think I've ever had two days alike in 47 years. That's what keeps me going, knowing that no two days are alike. I also like this business because we don't work in the winter."

A few years ago, Roy did think about planning for retirement. "I formed another company, Sports Turf Consulting," he explains. "I thought maybe when I turned 65 or 70 I'd retire and just do consulting. But, as I said before, there's so much work out there and we're well known in the business. So now I'm running two companies. But some day, I suppose, I'll slow down and sell Natural Athletic Turf and just do consulting."

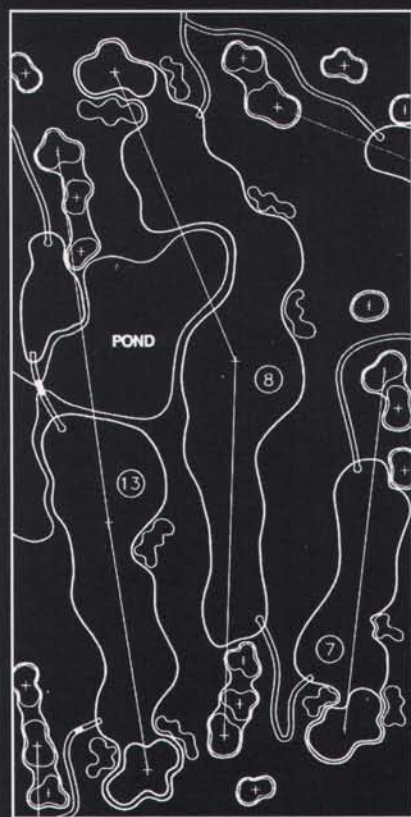
When he decides to sell, Roy would like the business to go to Jack Wallisch, his right-hand man and project manager for 22 years. "He will take over the company if he wants to," Roy says.

Keeping up with the times...

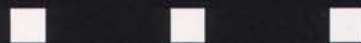
Roy has seen a lot of changes in the business since he put in his first lawn at the ripe old age of 10. "If I hadn't kept up on all the new systems, I would have been left in the dust," he says. "Times change. You can always learn new things. I figure my best business asset is that I started using new ideas right away, tried to be the first. By the time somebody else started doing the same thing, I was ahead of them."

And he's still learning. "I just got back from a conference in Tampa for the Sports Turf Managers Association," he continues. "Now there are four or five different methods across the country where

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they combine artificial turf with real turf, like they tried at Lambeau Field. The field in Tampa where the Super Bowl was played this year was partially artificial because they injected plastic tufts in the grass to help stabilize it. In fact, we STMA members walked the field two weeks before the game. But after watching the game, I don't think the field was that good.

"It was very slippery. It's always that way," Roy continues. "George Toma, who has been in charge of getting the field ready for every Super Bowl, does the same thing every year. He overseeds very heavily with rye. And he puts on tons of fertilizer. The grass gets lush and thick, but it's also young and fragile. At half time the players had to go and change their shoes. They weren't allowed to practice on that field before the game so they weren't quite sure what to use for their footing."

A spark plug...

Roy has known George Toma, former groundskeeper for the Kansas City Chiefs, for many years. "He was one of 10 of us who, in 1981, founded the Sports Turf Managers Association of America," he recalls. "So was I. And I was on its board of directors for five or six years."

Roy was also one of the founders of the Wisconsin Landscape Contractors Association in 1965, and its third president. He was one of the founders of the Wisconsin Landscape Federation, an association of associations, in the early 1970s and also its president. He was an early member of the Wisconsin Turf Association and served on its board of directors. He helped start the Wisconsin Sports Turf Managers Association three years ago and currently serves on that board. He's also a member of the WGCSA and the Wisconsin Parks and Recreation Association.

"I've enjoyed being on a lot of boards," he says. "I get the pulse of what's going on this way." When asked what prompted him to help start so many industry organizations he answers, "I really don't know except that I'm a go-getter. Got a big ego, too. And I'm not ashamed to say that."

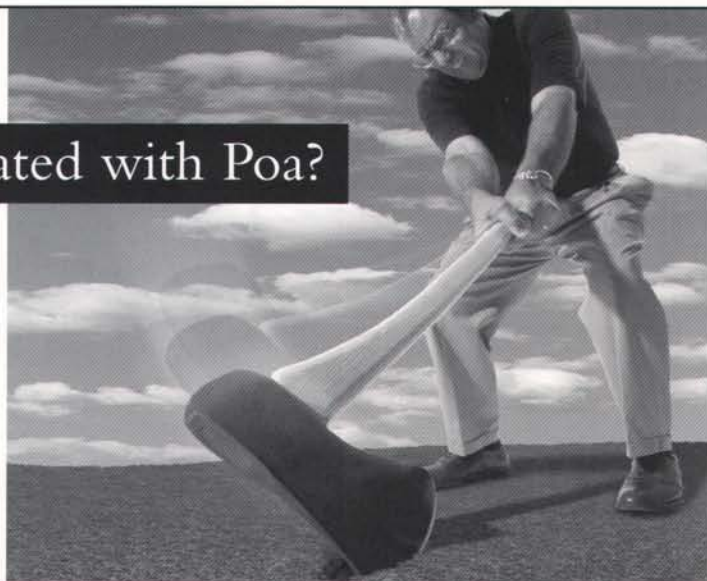
Golfer and gardener...

Roy doesn't just work with turf. He plays on it, too. "I love golf. I'm just an avid golfer," he admits. "And

so is my wife, Geri. We do a lot of golfing together." The Zehrens spend part of the winter near Destin in Florida's panhandle. They also have a summer place in Door County where they like to golf.

Roy even turns golfing into a learning experience. "You can always learn something on each course you go to," he says. "I kind of analyze each course and see things that I think I could do or that I wouldn't want to do. But I don't let it bother my game too

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much. I'm not going to be changing these courses."

Most of the year the Zehrens live in Port Washington where their hobby is gardening together. "We spend a lot of time, almost every day, in our garden," Roy says. "Lots of flowers. Vegetables, too. I like to work outside. I'm not a person who comes home from work and goes in the house. I work outside until it's dark."

"We belong to the Port Washington Garden Club," he continues. "Every year they have a garden walk where they sell tickets to the public so people can see five or six gardens. Our yard is on the tour this year."

Roy's wife, Geri, sells real estate in the Port Washington area. She also helps out a great deal with

Natural Athletic Turf. "I always say she's the brains of the company," Roy adds. Both Roy and Geri have children from previous marriages.

Hasn't forgotten the camera...

Did Roy ever regret not pursuing a career in photography? "No, no, no," he answers. "Because photography still plays an important part in my life. To me, landscaping is an art form. Photography is an art form. I combine the two. When I was first in business I took a lot of 'before and after' pictures of my job sites. I used that as a great selling tool."

"And I'm called on a lot to give lectures," he continues. "I gave a lecture just this past January at the Wisconsin Turf Expo. I use my slides to help show younger people how to do things. I try to give

something back to my industry. No, I have no regrets because I still use my photography with the business, and I still do my personal photography."

Plus, he's had a lot of personal satisfaction from his life's work. "When somebody comes to me with a raw piece of land and we can turn it into a beautiful athletic complex, that's just great," he says. "We did that for Beloit College a few years ago. They had 14 acres of woods, a swamp, and poor playing fields. We turned it into a completely new athletic complex. That gives me a chest-thumping pride. Everybody's happy. In business, that's what counts. Take something and make something." 🌱



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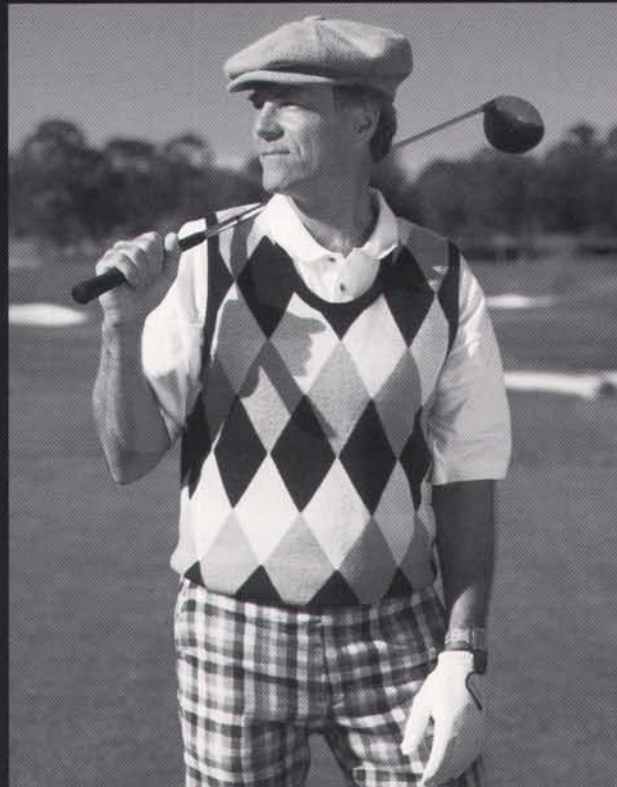
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Spring is Near: What's on the Horizon?



By Dr. R. Chris Williamson, Turfgrass and Ornamental Specialist, Department of Entomology, University of Wisconsin-Madison

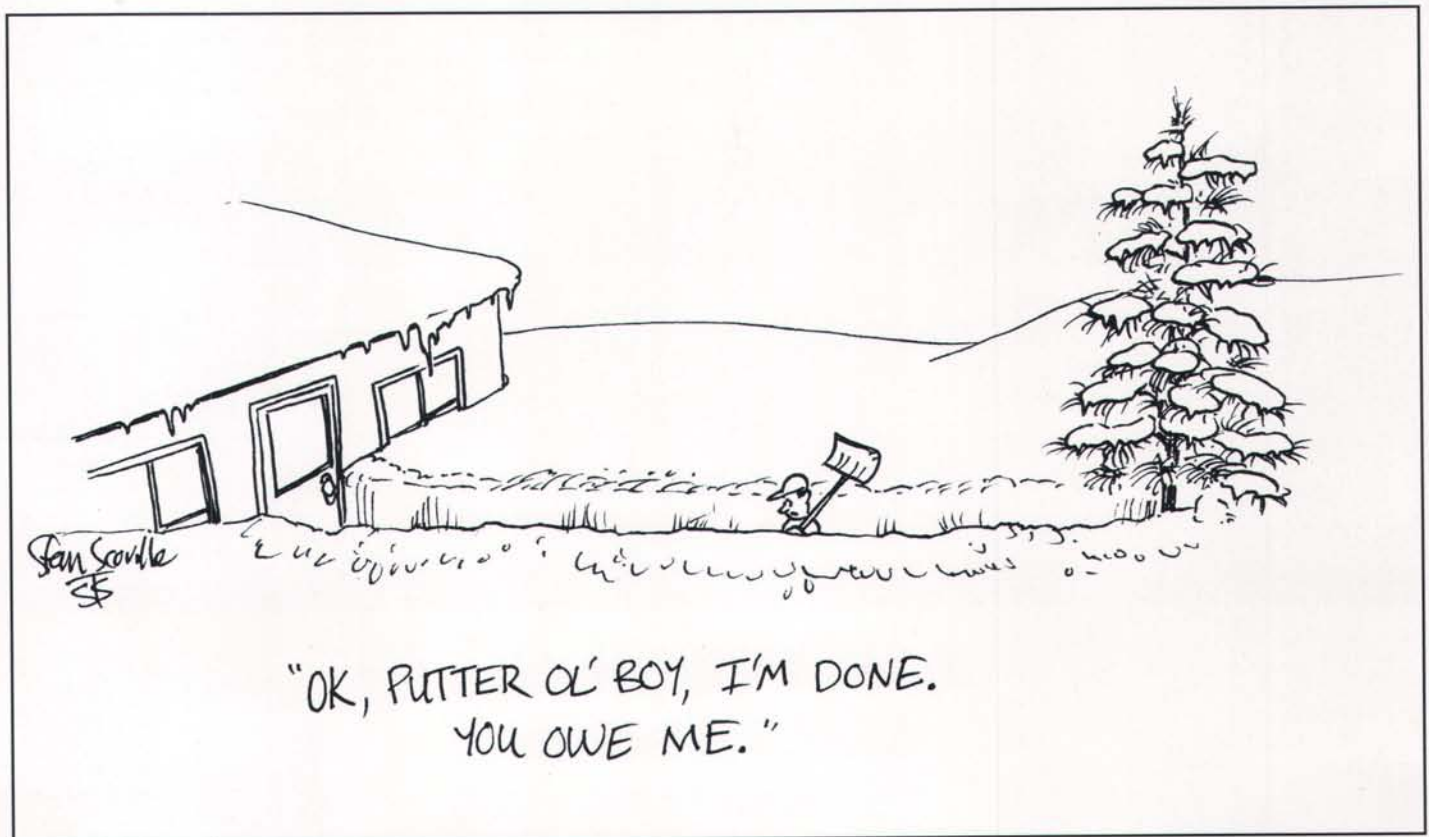
This past winter in Wisconsin has been relatively "mild," all things considered. We received our first measurable snowfall before the ground had a chance to adequately freeze. In addition, we continued to receive ample amounts (> 40 inches) of snowfall, further "insulating" the unfrozen soil. Subsequently, many important turfgrass insect pests, especially white grubs, may ultimately benefit from this situation.

Such conditions often stimulate a frequently asked question: how will the "mild winter" affect insect populations? The most logical response to this question is that insect populations will most likely be higher than normal. Unfortunately, there is no simple answer to this question. Factors such as abiotic (non-living)

and biotic (living) all play a role in an insect's ability to survive. Such obvious abiotic factors include: temperature, humidity, and light intensity. Other abiotic factors such as precipitation (rainfall/snow), wind, barometric pressure, and even altitude can affect insects. Because insects are cold-blooded, they react or respond with great sensitivity to temperature. Biotic factors, which include diseases, natural enemies and food shortage, can also influence insects. And biotic factaion or "bottom line" for insect populations or infestations in 2001? This question is nearly impossible to answer, but it is relatively safe to say that barring any late winter or early spring "hard" freezes or spring monsoons or flooding, 2001 may result in a "good" year

for insects. This may be especially true for the two white grub species (i.e., Japanese and May/June beetles). As you may be aware, Japanese beetles are slowly staking their claim in Wisconsin turf. To further this problem, last year's observations of May/June beetle adults indicate or suggest that we can anticipate or expect above normal grub infestations and possible damage in 2001.

The best prediction strategy is to simply closely monitor and/or periodically sample your turf on a regular basis. In addition, communicate with your staff, nearby colleagues, university specialists, or the University of Wisconsin Turf Diagnostic Lab (TDL). ♣





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New Initiative to Offer Help

By Gordon Waddington, Golf Course Superintendent, Country Club of Wisconsin

As your public relations director, I would be honored to help implement the GCSAA's new initiative, the Limited Budget Outreach Program. The fun in starting this program in our state chapter is that I get to ask our members for their help and assistance. As a reward, you get satisfaction that you have given something back to the profession and from the opportunity to enhance a neighbor's golf course.

The GCSAA Limited Budget Outreach Program has a Mission Statement that reads, "To help fellow superintendents enhance course conditions in order to help grow the game of golf." I'm thinking this is what's called a no-brainer for us here in Wisconsin, known across the land as good, neighborly, down-to-earth people. Well, that sounds like a description of a lot of golf course superintendents I know, doesn't it? This program is simple, involves little time but can make a huge impact on our identity, profession, and the golf industry as a whole. All I need is a few volunteers and a little time.

The program is designed to provide advice and assistance to golf facilities with limited resources. The facilities that will be targeted by this program are those with extremely low budgets, which may or may not employ a full-time "superintendent." The goal of this program is to match experienced superintendents to those charged with the maintenance at these limited budget facilities, in order to provide technical advice and support as requested.

GCSAA chapters are being asked to do the following:

1. Develop a list of limited budget facilities in their areas, along with locations and contact numbers.
2. Develop a list of volunteer superintendents within their chapter.
3. Develop and maintain an inventory list of low-cost used equipment that can be purchased by limited budget facilities.
4. Publicize the program at monthly meetings and encourage participation of volunteers.
5. Encourage monthly meeting attendance by those superintendents employed by limited budget facilities.

GCSAA will then provide:

1. Necessary forms and information to get the program started.
2. Complementary information packets on golf course programs that can be ordered for limited budget facilities to assist in running their golf

course maintenance program.

3. One free GCSAA membership for limited budget superintendents after July 2001.
4. Publicity about the program and tracking/recognition of the program success.

This program is not intended to be a "I'm here to fix your problems," but rather an "I'm available to assist you." It should also be understood that this program can provide a learning experience for both the volunteer and the limited budget superintendent. While we anticipate that most superintendents at limited budget facilities will be receptive to the idea of seeking advice, others may be less inclined until some level of understanding of this program is achieved. Just following your own instincts should prove to be the best route in developing a working relationship.

So if this sounds like it feels good to your soul, then please assist in the implementation of this program. I will not be at the spring business meeting but Kris Pinkerton will speak briefly on its merit. I can be reached via e-mail at gordowadd@aol.com or you can find me in the directory. I'm looking for superintendents who want to volunteer a little of their time for some great satisfaction. I wish to begin this program as soon as possible and plan to ask GCSAA to send out a representative to present the program at one of our monthly meetings. ♣



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Wood Heat: Is It Right For Your Maintenance Facility?

By Gary Gaard, Turfgrass Diagnostic Lab, O.J. Noer Turfgrass Research and Education Facility

Earlier this year there was a cost-of-heating discussion on the NoerNet. In summary, the combined cold weather and the cost of fuel had some folks asking how far they could turn down the thermostat. An alternative to turning down the thermostat is to supplemental heat with wood. Burning wood provides BTUs, but in addition there is an added incentive to improve golf course grounds by removal of hazardous or diseased trees, weedy trees, trees that are encroaching in play areas, or trees that are shading turf in play areas. Additionally, that stack of shipping pallets will

burn quite nicely.

Since the early 1970s my total home heat has been wood. I'll share here experiences with wood stoves and handling wood. You can use the information to decide if (supplemental) wood heat is right for you.

In 1978 I moved to a larger house. The 12 gauge steel wood stove from the old house moved also, but soon proved to be too small. It was replaced by a wood furnace that has these features: cost - \$1,000, weight - 600 pounds, lots of fire brick and cast iron to raise combustion temperatures, 110,000 BTU output per hour, and

a six cubic foot fire chamber capacity. A fan circulates heated air through hot air and return ducts, and most importantly the furnace has secondary combustion, a second air supply that increases efficiency and also burns gases and particles not burned by the primary air supply. A class A chimney is required. Although insurance premiums were not affected, I did have to file a description with my agent. You can find equivalent stoves and stoves with many other features on the Internet.

Labor, including cutting wood, is approximately 40 hours annual-



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