

Charles Erickson

Father of Minnesota Golf Course Superintendents' Association

By JACK KOLB
MGCSA Life Member

(Editor's Note: As the MGCSA celebrates its 75th year we will reprint articles from the past beginning with this article about Charles Erickson which was first printed in the April 1999 issue of Hole Notes.)

One hundred and one years ago Charles Erickson was hired from the Minneapolis Park Board to become the head greenskeeper at The Minikahda Club (1899). He was approximately 35 years of age when he began his tenure at Minikahda and there is little or no history on his expertise or employment with the Park Board. He was affectionately known as the "General" by the club membership. By July 15 of that same year Charlie had completed the first nine holes at Minikahda and an appropriate ceremony was performed as the first ball was driven from the number one tee by the club president.

Charly's work at Minikahda was a pioneering adventure. There were no consultants, a very small contingent of other greenskeepers to commiserate with and no agronomically educated salesmen. His philosophy then would be to recognize and solve problems "In House." Charly Erickson apparently was able to do just that. His able assistant was a gentleman by the name of Gust Olson. In interviewing the few surviving persons that knew Charly Erickson personally, it was thought that Gust Olson was an expert agronomist in his own right. So they probably complimented each other.

Time makes it difficult to learn an awful lot about Charly Erickson but this writer was fortunate enough to have been associated with a number of his crew. It is through them that I am attempting to bring to you some of the stories that were told about his gentleman.

When I arrived at Minikahda there were three former employees who had worked under the Erickson regime. These were Ray Hill, Idon Haugen and Ludwid Nelson. Ludwid and Idon each became succeeding Greenskeepers at Minikahda.

Ray Hill had begun work at Minikahda in 1920 soon after the Club had gone to 18 holes. Ray had been the only fairway cutter from 1920 until he died in 1958. He was able to tell me many of the innovations and inventions that had taken place at Minikahda during those years. He had snapshots and photographs of the "Bull Tractor," or first gas device had the mowers replacing the front wheels of the unit. Today that would not be a problem, especially with



welded frames and hydraulic pistons to steer and maneuver the beast. But as Ray described it, the framework was heavy and crude, with cables, pulleys and a very high leverage steering ratio. Before this (1920) the fairways were mowed with "horse" drawn mowers.

Since the term "Horse" has been mentioned, it is interesting to note how Charly Erickson utilized (in somewhat European fashion) the dietary waste of a horse. For those who are familiar with the layout at Minikahda, the horses (six) were stabled in a barn between No. 14 and No. 10 fairways. This area was also directly behind No. 13 green. On the backside of the hill leading down to the 13th green was a large cistern into which the wet-waste and horse urine was conducted. Charly made his own fertilizer in those early days. Material from the cistern was put into a large (cooperage" barrel (mounted on steel wheels) and with the aid of a diaphragm pump the material was sprayed onto the greens. The wooden cooperage barrel was still at Minikahda in 1966.

Richard Knudson, as a child, lived in a home situated within Minikahda grounds and worked for Charly Erickson as a high school student. These are some thoughts that he was able to pass on to me:

"I remember a farmer would come with a horse drawn wagons loaded with manure. The manure, sand and other soil were left to compost and manure. When the pile was ready to sift it always seemed to be on a hot day. But, plenty of beer and water was available to quaff our thirst."

Richard Knudson also passed along this observation: "My remembrance of Charly is that he always wore a hat, tie, suspenders along with a jacket or vest."

All the pictures that we have seen of him bear this out. To further understand the character of the man, Richard goes on to say "When Charly was in his 70s he would stand on his head to show he was in good shape and I believe to show off in front of the young ladies."

Charly Erickson developed an irrigation system early in his tenure. He is given credit for the first golf course irrigation system in the U.S. (by Minikahda records). The system consisted of a series of 4-inch pipe mounted on two-wheeled carriages. Each carriage was located at a 16-20 foot section of the line and from what we can gather from pictures looked like it would be 80 to 100 feet long. Actually they look and were similar to modern center pivot agricul-

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Charly Erickson—

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tural irrigation systems. How the water was delivered to the piping is not detailed. The apparatus nicknamed (The Sea Serpent" was moved from one location to the next by horses.

Erickson had arbor-savvy as well as turf. Many of the large trees at Minikahda had large cavities discretely filled with concrete, cabling of weak crotches and weep-pipes. I recall standing next to a large elm one day as a storm front moved in. Suddenly there was a stream of water flowing from the weep-pipe, apparently caused by the sudden change of air pressure. When removing a storm damaged tree, much caution had to be exercised in the use of power saws for fear of the hardware that could be present. To this day dark bands can be seen around many of the trees. To keep leaf eating caterpillars from climbing up the trees, a treatment was devised which involved "rasping a smooth band" around the tree trunk and then applying a "sticky matrix" within this band. This formed a barrier in the worms journey up the trunk. Unfortunately, when there was a heavy infestation, the worms would soon build a bridge of immobilized bodies with safe passage for others to crawl over. Modern insecticides abolished the practice.

Charly Erickson was instrumental in changing many of the golf courses in Minnesota from sand greens to bentgrass. One of the documented cases was Montevideo Country Club. Ray Hill, a 37-year employee, related the

story about collecting many bushels of bentgrass stolons which Charly grew along the creek bank on No. 8 fairway of Minikahda. After work on a particular evening they (Charly, a waitress from the clubhouse and Ray) headed for Montevideo to plant the Montevideo greens. Maynard Erickson (MGCSA Life Member - no relation) has stated that Charly was responsible for most of the sand green conversion to bentgrass in this area.

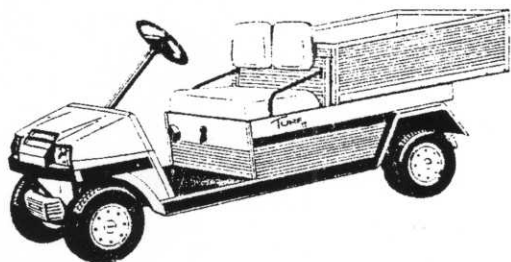
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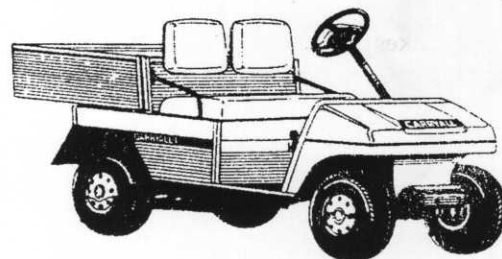
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Charly Erickson suffered a broken hip and other injuries in a fall down the "Minikahda tool-house basement steps." He died from other causes one year later just short of his 78th birth date in 1942. — Jack Kolb

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