

Where Is He Today?

Mark Smith

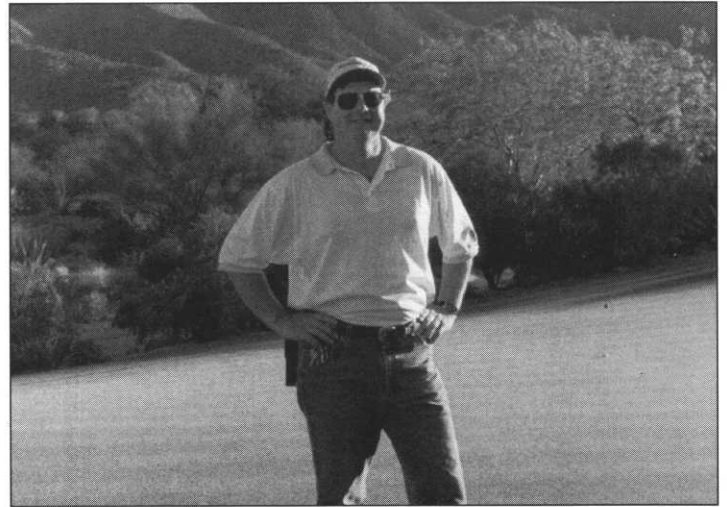
By JACK KOLB
MGCSA Life Member

Back in 1978, nine years after this writer had left Minneapolis Golf Club, a young 27-year-old was appointed superintendent of MGC. In the routine of making sales calls for Turf Supply Company I was able to visit with the mechanic at the Club. He had worked for me and continued on through a succession of superintendents. Walter Gunn as a genius inventory type of mechanic and was now under the employee of this young man. He felt that this fellow, Mark Smithy, was going to be a good superintendent. Walt did not realize how prophetic his statement would be.

Mark Smith first became interested in a golf career when he was nine years old, playing with his dad at Madison Country Club in Madison, Minn. From the time he could ride his bike he spent his entire summers at Madison Country Club playing golf. As a sophomore in high school he was able to secure a job on the grounds crew. The "crew" as Mark referred to it was made of two persons -- Mark and a senior citizen who mowed fairways and roughs with gang mowers pulled by a military surplus jeep. Mark did all the delicate work such as mowing greens, dealing with hazards and pestilence that attack his work of art. The greens were the only portion of the course which received irrigation -- guess who came back at night setting the hoses and sprinklers.

After high school graduation Mark enrolled at what was then Southwest Minnesota State College in Marshall, Minn. Gravitating immediately to Marshall Country Club, Mark soon met and was employed on a part time basis by MGCSA venerable member Carl Zahn. What was referred to as part time work while attending college soon turned into part time college as they built and opened a second nine in 1972. Mark did not abandon his quest for education. One of his favorite subjects being Spanish, led him to enroll at *La Universidad De Las Americas* in Cholula, Pueblo, Mexico for a "J" term.

By the fall of 1972, being immersed in golf course construction for most of the summer, Mark decided that his was his vocation and enrolled in Penn State's two year turf program. While in school at Penn State word of Carl Zahn's death was relayed to Mark by then-club president, Vern Skramstad, from Marshall, "Would he (Mark) be willing to take the job as course superintendent even though he had not completed his training in Turf Management? Mark now wore two hats, one as a student and second as a superintendent of Marshall Golf Club. So the summer of 1973 was



MARK SMITH – At the end of an arduous day with the sun setting behind the Santa Rosa Mountains in the background.

spent running Marshall Golf Club and a rather questionable living abode was provided as part of his salary. After graduation from Penn State in early spring of 1974 mark continued his position until 1977.

The opportunity of an assistant job opened at The Minikahda Club in Minneapolis and he worked in that position until he was called to take the responsibilities at Minneapolis Golf Club in December of 1978. The Minikahda position introduced Mark to a host of young men who would go on to manage classic courses of their own in the following years. Mark points out that lasting friendships along the way have helped him in developing and securing the vocation that he so passionately follows.

Minneapolis Golf Club revealed a history of mechanical wizards. Herbert Cohrs who had been the superintendent for so many years had built numerous machines along with a nephew Roger Ortloff. Herb did not patent all his works so therefore did not get full credit for his creativity. Herb Cohrs built the first "Greens Aire" in 1939. Without a patent and to keep one Scotty McLaren from taking his ideas back to Toro, Herb completely enclosed the machine in a metal shroud which prevented anyone from seeing the mechanics of the thing. Other (give me a piece of the action) partners eventually had the machine patented and the shroud was removed. Herb also was responsible for the

(Continued on Page 10)

Mark Smith-

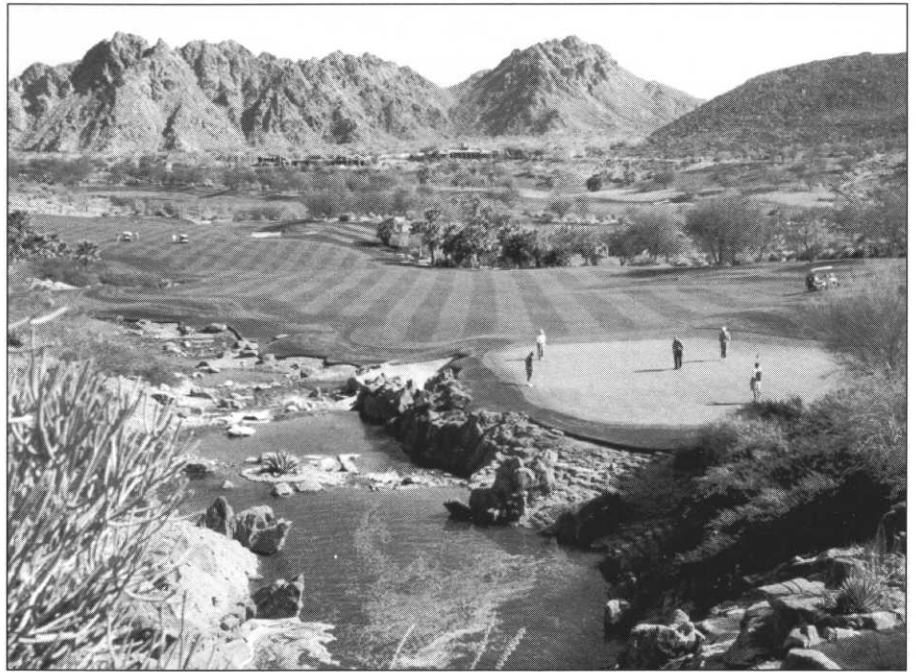
(Continued from Page 9)

first good "Topdressing" machine which he designed as a miniature manure spreader. Instead of paddles which "flipped" the manure, Herb used a cylindrical brush that rotated in a way that macerated soil clumps, driving the dressing vertically to the ground or surface to be dressed.

Mark's inherited mechanic who was mentioned in the beginning of this dissertation was also a creative wizard. Walter Gunn had only one of his inventions patented and found that the return on cost of patents was not worth the effort. Thus he just continued to build whatever the superintendent needed and found the thrill of a new machine compensation enough. He built a utility vehicle for Mark using a modified Volkswagen Beetle which was dubbed "The Grasshopper." Mr. Gunn built many of the pieces of machinery which were used in overhaul and equipment maintenance. One of his outstanding contributions was a "Riding Reciprocating Aerifier" mounted on the back of a Cushman.

Mark's assessment of Minnesota goes like this: One day it's warm and the rest of the year it's cold. Or this one: Many are cold, but few are frozen! mark's wife Elsa was raised in the warm nearly tropical part of Mexico and she was beginning to love Minnesota -- "The land of many cultures -- mostly throat!" Thus Mark sought out one of his former Minikahda friends, Douglas Anderson, a Willmar native who as now working at The Vintage Club in Indian Wells, Calif. Douglas Anderson interceded for him and got a job for Mark across the street from The Vintage Club at a golf complex called Desert Horizons Country Club also in Indian Wells.

Now this is what we call "gutsy!" mark packed his bags, left his wife and three children behind to go work in a non-indigenous desert surrounding. This was a complete new



NUMBER 10 FAIRWAY AND GREEN, 520 yards. Would you believe with all the rock around Mark has a number of artificial rock in crucial places? Note the sculpted edges where turf ends and desert begins. Water is a premium here in the desert.

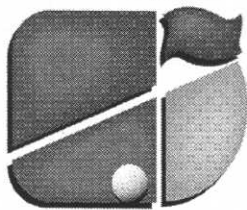
agronomic change from what he had been trained and accustomed to. Besides the change from cool season to warm season grasses, there was overseeding and Teamster Unions to learn about. After three months of indoctrination and when he felt that relocation would work, with some apprehension, Mark brought his family out to the desert.

After eight years at DHCC Mark had established himself as a good journeyman and was chosen as the Golf Course Superintendent at a course under construction called "The Quarry at La Quinta" in La Quinta, Calif. This was reaching the top of the mount! The job had an opportunity to be involved in construction of a Fazio designed, exclusively private desert course. "The Quarry" was built and opened within a nine month period.

The Quarry is built into the base of the Santa Rosa Mountains. Elevations vary from sea level to 318 feet. It is a beautiful setting and as voted the third best new private course to open in the year of 1994 (*Golf Digest*, May 1995).

The Fazio design incorporates a wide variety of native and non-native arid plant material which provides colorful displays throughout the year. There is so much to say about the construction and maintenance of this golf course that it would fill the entire pages of *Hole Notes*. It has been decided to do another article just covering that aspect of the story in a later issue.

Mark credits much of his success, building and maintaining "The
(Continued on Page 13)



**GILL
MILLER** INC.
Golf Course Architects

Design • Renovation • Master Planning • Practice Centers

122 North 2nd Street • River Falls, WI 54022 • 715-425-9511 • e-mail: info@gillmiller.com

visit our website www.gillmiller.com

Member: American Society of Golf Course Architects

Mark Smith-

(Continued from Page 10)

Quarry to his Hispanic crew. He is very generous in his praise for them. Some have worked with mark for 15 years. In speaking with some of his crew there was a great deal of affection for their boss, Mark Smith, as well.

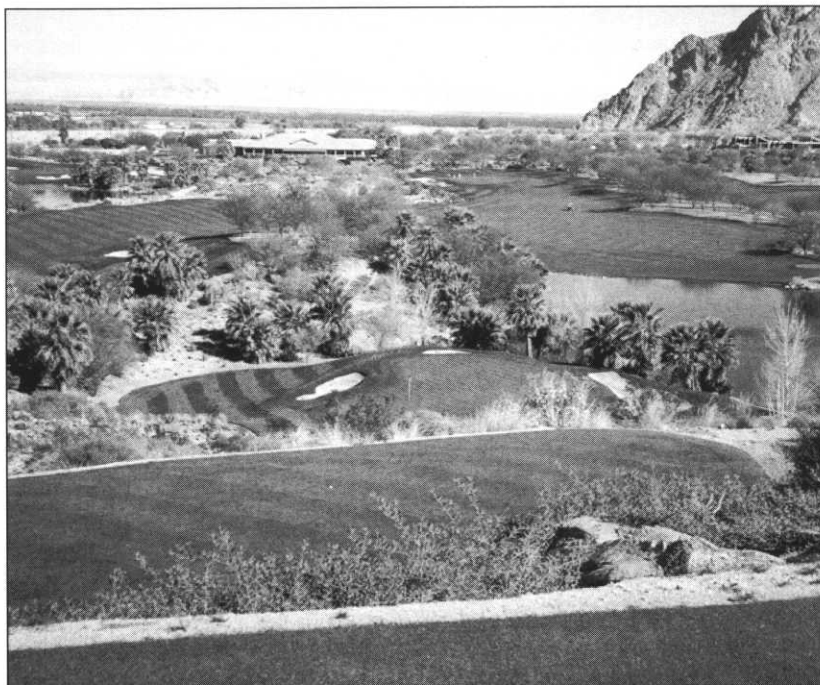
A well-tuned team of 38 employees must be good when they can win awards such as the following:

+ The Quarry at La Quinta was voted the tenth best conditioned course in 1995. (*Golf Digest*, May 1995).

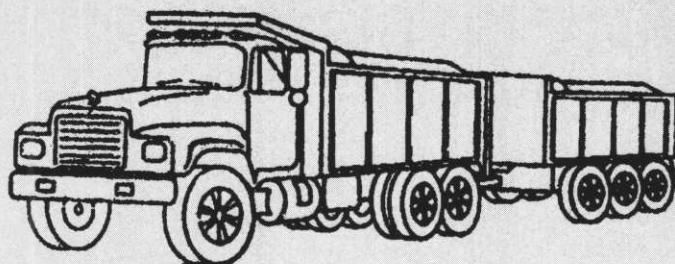
+ The Quarry at La Quinta was listed at #73 on *Golf Digests'* Top 100 courses in its first year of eligibility (*Golf Digest*, May 1999).

+ The Quarry at La Quinta was rated third best conditioned course behind Augusta National and Pine Valley (*Golf Digest*, May 1999).

Mark and his wife Elsa live in a traditional type home, typical of those found in his desert valley. They have three children, a married daughter Andrea, and two sons, Aaron and Antonio.



NUMBER 8 GREEN FROM ELEVATED TEES: A par 3 at 143 yards. Note off in the distance and behind the clubhouse the valley beyond is at sea level. Continuing down this valley a distance of about 20 miles the area falls 235 feet below sea level and is the location of the "Salton Sea."



LEITNER COMPANY

Specializing in Soils for Golf Course Maintenance & Construction

Soil mixing and processing specialists.

Supplying the Golf Course Industry with soil and sand products for over 50 years.
From 10 yards to 10,000 yards - material to specification for topdressing and construction.

Quality - Reliability - Experience

MIKE LEITNER

LEITNER COMPANY

945 Randolph Avenue ~ St. Paul, Minnesota 55102

(651) 291-2655