

Remembering Emil Picha

By JACK KOLB

One of the first things you noted as you met Emil Picha was that you were dealing with a man who was always probing for an answer or who always wanted to know what your opinion was to any leading question. He very seldom would give his point of view until he had quizzed everyone else. He had definite opinions on certain subjects but if it dealt in the area of a science or sociological topic he was always the listener. He impressed you as being very bright and comprehended all that was being discussed.



EMIL PICHA

The other thing that impressed you immediately if you hung around his shop or work area was his frugality. He was very proud of this characteristic. Yet he was able to converse with persons of all social levels. He had a professorial demeanor, he always had a pipe in his hand and the pipe would go up to his lips during conversation, pausing slightly as he would take a drag on the pipe and then continue his conversation in a slow

methodical manner. During this slow manner of speech you could see the gears in his; mind organizing into a well thought out rebuttal or affirmation of a topic.

I would like to relate a few stories on the nature of the man. Back in the 1950's Golf Course Superintendents began meeting at different Golf Clubs for education type meetings on an irregular basis. Previous to this they would meet in small groups down in their shop area and discuss among themselves what they thought the answer was to certain problems. These were some far out theories to turf management, certain individuals seemed to think that their approach was the correct and only solution. Some were reluctant to tell of their success and felt sharing information jeopardized their job. Scientific data was not in their vocabulary.

In 1958 as Superintendent at Minikahda Club this writer hosted one of these information meetings inviting Dr. James Watson of the Toro Company and Dr. William Klompars of the Eli Lilly Company as guest speakers. Our greens-chairman was very impressed with this approach and decided to put on a very classy dinner for all the visiting Superintendents with the Club picking up the tab. We had Pheasant under glass and at each place setting was a highball- glass filled to the brim with Martini cocktail. Emil happened to be seated next to me and since I did not care

for the Martini I passed it to Emil. As the cocktail glass appeared to be empty the waiter would come around with a pitcher full of mix and offer one refill. This meant that Emil had at least four Martini's. Carl Anderson Superintendent of Woodhill C.C. was MGCSA president that year and was acting as "Master of Ceremonies" introducing the dignitaries when he decided we should hear a few words from Emil who usually had a humorous philosophy on things. Emil began with these exact words "I am not here to gild the lilly nor to perfume the rose" and he continued on this rather eclectic talk for at least 10 minutes, or a lot longer than Carl had expected. It was a very engaging and humorous talk, enjoyed by everyone. At the end of his dissertation Emil sat down, turned to me and said -- "It must have been those Martini's, what exactly did I say?"

Another story about Emil involved Dr. Jim Watson who had been invited by Emil to visit the Oak Ridge Country Club. Emil for some reason or other had prepared and seeded a rather large area on the Golf Course Grounds and after their tour of the Course Emil invited Dr. Watson to observe a new seeding which apparently was coming along very well. Emil took Dr. Watson to a particular portion of the area where nothing seemed to be growing. Emil's question to Dr. Watson was "why do we not have germination or growth in this particular area?". Dr. Watson got down studied the soil and began a litany of many good-theories why seed might not germinate in that area. When Watson had completed with the list of things that might have influence the lack of germination, Emil interrupted him and said: "The reason there is no germination in this particular portion is because I did not put any seed here!"

Frugal-qualities of Emil could be seen everywhere. He would have tractors working on the course that were Model "T" vintage (the years were 1950-60's), with steel wheels the lugs of which had long ago worn so badly they (the lugs) had to be replaced with acorn nuts for traction. If you visited his shop in the winter you were greeted by a wood and coal burning stove. When asked if the fire might not last through a cold winters night, he would answer with "no I come twice during the night and stoke the fire with more fuel".

One of the quality stories about Emil's frugality has to do with Scotty McLaren and the Toro Company. This of course is back in the days of cast iron wheels on the fairway mowers. As you might suspect Emil had used these mowers for so long that the lugs and striations-for-traction were worn absolutely smooth. Emil priced out a new set of wheels and decided that the price was more than he wanted to spend. Now it happened that the Minneapolis Moline Company happened to be in Emil's back yard in the city of Hopkins.

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Excerpts From Emil Picha's Autobiography

Edited by JACK KOLB

Emil Picha was born of immigrant Czeck (Czechoslovakia) immigrants who had arrived in the USA just a few years before he was born in 1899. At the age of five he remembered a tornado demolishing their Minnetonka-township home and all the farm buildings. He was schooled only through the eighth grade but was the valedictorian of his graduating class.

As a youngster he was fascinated by all things mechanical -- it was not clear how long he continued working on the family farm -- he mentions that he made a modification or an invention in regard to a "haymower" and that he worked with steam engines. (possibly steam powered tractors). He continued working as a farm hand and in road construction until his 19th year of life. At that age (19) he became manager of what he referred to as a large Dairy Farm. He continued in this line of work until the Spring of 1921 when he went to work for a club under construction called Oak Ridge Country Club. By August of that year he was in full charge of the grounds crew. The first nine holes were completed that year.

In his autobiography he states that he had good luck in "turfing the new course". Instead of standing around and watching the seed germinate Emil says he "dabbled in buying, repairing and selling Model "T" Fords." Because of the seasonal type work which lasted less than five months Emil decided to resign effective December 31, 1926. During this brief hiatus Emil realized that golf-course work was a little more sophisticated than his farm experience and decided that "greenkeeping" should be his lifetime vocation. So he signed on with the Midland Hills Golf Club on Jan. 1, 1927.

In 1930 at the age of 31 Emil married, bought a home across the street from Hamline University on Snelling Avenue in St. Paul and raised both a son and a daughter. The tenured years while at Midland Hills were rough ones. First the "Great Depression" which started in 1929 and never actually ended until after WW II. Then the War Years with its labor shortage when all young men were called into service, gas rationing placed golf clubs at the absolute bottom of priorities. This meant that all work done on the course had to be done with non-power equipment, either manual or horse drawn mowers.

Shortly before the war ended on December 31, 1944 Emil resigned from Midland Hills Golf Club and returned to Oak Ridge on January 1, 1945. Oak Ridge had completed a second or "back nine" in 1940. Emil was a charter member of what is now known as the MGCSA. He was proactive serving as president for two years and as vice president for one year. He served as chair and member of many committees.

Emil Picha rarely missed a meeting whether it was national or local in scope. He associated with those from

whom he could learn and listed many educational pioneers in his autobiography. He not only cultivated educators as his friends but felt privileged to have the opportunity to work with successful men whether they be economists, engineers, community leaders, movers and shakers. Emil also believed that he could always learn from those who worked for him. As he said to this writer one time, "listen to others, even the dull and ignorant; they too have their story!"

Emil Picha--

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Emil had close-friends who worked there and could cast the wheels for him at a slight savings provided they had an original wheel for a pattern. Scotty McLaren was straight from Scotland and he also knew how to pinch the mighty penny, and it was his job to make a profit for Toro. Scotty suspecting Emil's proclivity to save, sensed the money saving plan and provided a wheel to Emil that was defective, such that Emil would have a batch of wheels that were not adaptable. Of course this story was told to me by Scotty and I have a feeling that somehow-or-other Emil made those wheels work.¹

In 1958 as Minneapolis Golf Club was preparing for the coming PGA tourney (1959), the club decided to upgrade their wooden "blacksmith-like" maintenance facility by tearing the wooden building down and constructing a new building of concrete and cinder block. The Golf Course Superintendents were invited to meet there in the spring of 59 as sort of a "Grand -Opening" of the new shop. Emil and myself decided we should go together -- the building was state-of-the-art for its time. It had a large gas-heated workshop area, with a large unheated area for fertilizer and equipment storage. The outstanding feature however was a large restroom with wash facilities, urinals, multiple stools and a shower stall. A shower! -- something never before seen in a Minnesota golf maintenance facility. Although the buildings I worked-out-of at Minikahda were scavenged sheds from around lake Calhoun, we did have gas-heat, running water and indoor toilet. I proclaimed to Emil that I thought it an indictment against any club that would not have water for washing and inside toilets. Emil looked me straight in the eye and said "I have an outside toilet!"

It is my understanding that when Oak Ridge built their state-of-the-art maintenance building, some years later, Emil used the out-house as a small storage shed.²

1. Reference: Scotty McLaren,

2. Reference: David Streater