

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--

(Continued from Page 16)

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