

## What I've Seen In The Past 50 Years

Clarence Wolfrom, Sr.  
Golf Course Superintendent  
Maple Lane Golf Club  
Sterling Heights, MI

The 50th annual Turfgrass Conference at Michigan State University is a great milestone in our turf profession. I thank the Lord and this College for all the knowledge I have gained here in the past 50 years. All the professors and the men interested in turf I have met here have contributed to a very enjoyable part of my life. Few Colleges, if any, have been helping in turf work for 50 years.

In 1930 we held our first Conference here. 25 or 30 men was a big turnout. Today we have over 500 here interested in turfgrass. In those days no one knew much about turf, including the professors. They learned from us, and we all learned from one another's experience. We all helped one another with anything we knew in our profession.

I am going to bring out some of the ways we maintained turf before our first Conference, and also some of the big improvements we have today.

In 1923, at age 15, my first contact with turf at Meadowbrook Golf Club was to screen enough topsoil to topdress all 18 fairways. The fairways were bunches of sheeps fescue. We seeded them first, then topdressed them to cover the seed, so they would fill in for a good turf. The Club then bought 8 carloads of pig manure. We unloaded between 1:30 and 4:00 a.m., when there were no passenger cars on the track. "This was a stinky job." We spread this on the fairways in winter and dragged it in with a brick drag in spring. This did improve the turf, but what a lot of work it was. The manure was spread with a manure spreader. The topsoil was spread with a wheelbarrow and shovels. We mowed the fairways and rough with horses with rubber shoes, so they didn't mark the turf.

In 1924 the next big improvement was a Caterpillar tractor with wood cleats. This pulled a 5-gang mower. We then got 2 used Fordson tractors. You would crank all forenoon to use them in the afternoon.

In 1924 mowing greens was done with the old hand-push putting green mower. After 2 days rain the greens would be 3/4" high. We could only push the mower cutting 4" wide and empty the catcher at each end. Sometimes we would put a rope in front. One would pull and one push. Any way to get the green cut. 10 hours of that and you'd had it.

To weed the greens we used an ice pick. Dip it in muriatic acid, push it down in the center of a dandelion or planton, and it would kill the weed. But in 4 or 5 weeks new plants from seed would be thick as ever. I can remember 6 men on one green for 2 ten hour days. Then we would seed it and topdress it. It would be better for a short time and up would come the weeds again.

We treated greens by using a 50 gallon barrel with a pump on it. We mixed the amount of chemical we wanted to use on that green, then pumped it into the hose you watered the green with, hoping to get it on even.

In 1930 we held our first Conference at Michigan State. It started Monday at 8:00 a.m. and ran to Friday at 5:00 p.m. No slipping off at 2:00 p.m. like we do now. We were there to learn what we could. Most of us stayed in private homes across Grand River Ave. with people that rented out rooms. In order to have enough beds to go around, you had to sleep with one of your buddies. They were all V-type beds. My first bed partner was Dave Applehaulf, from Genesee Hills Golf Club. Dave weighed 300 lbs. in his birthday suit. Dave got into the V-bed first and I tried to hang on the edge for 3 nights. The fourth night I went to Williamston and stayed with friends, to get a good nights sleep.

In the early days we held the Conference the first week in December. By 1935 most of us were staying in the Hotel up in Lansing. For some reason our Conference dates were changed from December to the following March. In December

of that year, the time we were scheduled to be there, the Hotel burned down. Many of the guests were burned to death. The Lord was kind, or some of us wouldn't be here today. We would have been in that Hotel that day.

In 1930 we had our Conference in Ag Hall. We sat in the same small seats the students used. You were glad when 5:00 p.m. came. The experimental plots were moved every year, not because we were done with them, but they were always building a new building where we had our plots.

In 1938 some of the grasses in those plots were Washington Bent, Metropolitan Bent, Seaside Bent, Kentucky Blue Grass, Creeping Red Fescue, Sheeps Fescue, and Red Top. A lot of fescue and Red Top greens were used at that time. We were trying to find the best way to maintain them. In 1925 was the first Washington Bent green I helped plant at Western Golf Club.

In 1950 a committee was formed with the purpose to organize the Turf Foundation. Headed by Dr. Jim Tyson, Bruce Matthews, Ward Cornwell, Bill Smith, George Prieskorn, Clarence Wolfrom and Leo Johnson, The Michigan Turfgrass Foundation was formed. Bruce Matthews, as president and Dr. Tyson in soils, headed the Foundation. Progress was very slow until one day we heard Dr. Ken Payne came to Michigan State as head of Farm Crops. Some of us knew Dr. Payne from Purdue University. Also about his interest in turf. We contacted Dr. Payne with our problems. Dr. Payne was more than willing to head up our Foundation, but our problem was to get the Foundation out of Soils and into Farm Crops. Ward Cornwell did just that. Dr. Payne took one of his professorships job in Farm Crops and hired Dr. James Beard, and we were on our way. With help from Dr. Rieke, Dr. Vargas, Dr. Beard, Dr. Payne, Dr. Kaufmann, and many other professors and technicians, golf course superintendents, park, cemetery, road supervisory personnel, and many others, we have one of the best Research Centers and Turf Foundations anywhere.

In 1967, Frank Forier, President of the Turf Foundation and Dr. Payne as Head of the Foundation, called a meeting at the Country Club of Detroit, to get a number of superintendents to contact the Michigan Legislature Appropriations Committee to get some State help for our turf research at State. Brochures were made up showing the value of turfgrass in Michigan. We got a \$50,000.00 appropriation for many years. This shows what can be done with leadership and meeting with the right people. Gene Johanningsmeier worked hard on this, our only College man to talk to the appropriation committee.

Oct. 11, 1979 was the ground breaking for our new turf building here, to be known as the Hancock Building. I had the privilege of being there. It was very gratifying to me after 50 years, to see the start of a new turf center. I cannot count the many problems that were solved here in the past 50 years. I am sure there will be more solved here in the next 50 years.

The one biggest and best thing that has happened for better turf in the last 50 years was 2-4-D weed killer. The biggest thing that is going to happen for better turf in the next 50 years are chemicals and methods to eliminate our problems, and create an environment for new problems.

Looking ahead 50 years, we will have the same grasses we have today. Rye grass, bluegrass, bent, fescue, bermuda, with improved strains. New insects and fungi, that will be made by eliminating the old ones, producing an environment ideal for something new to thrive on. This happened the past 50 years and will in the next 50. Killing one makes an environment for another. The things you do today in the new Hancock Building or anywhere else, for turf may make another Bill Daniels, Jim Beard, Ken Payne, Paul Rieke, Joe Vargas, John Kaufmann, Bruce Matthews, Herb Shave, Bill Smith, H. Godwin, Duston, or Jim Tyson.

During the next 50 years turf will be used even more. "Better Methods" will be needed to grow and maintain it, with less of the good soils. Much more will have to be done to keep turf conditions as they are today and improve them. Turf has been good to me the last 50 years. My sincere wish is that it is good to you also. Remember, put something into turf. I am sure you will take something out.