

SOD FARM/GOLF COURSE COMBO

BOB CLARK converted his corn fields and dairy farm into a thriving public golf course.

Acting on a suggestion 11 years ago, Clark converted the 160-acre family farm on the southern outskirts of Des Moines into an 18-hole public golf course. Later he started growing cultivated sod for market.

"I didn't know the first thing about golf courses or golfing," Clark said. "I had no idea what grass to sow for greens even."

First he went around the area and studied other courses. Then he enlisted the assistance of two Iowa State University professors, Dr. Elliott Roberts, when he was at Iowa State, and Don White. They designed the course and staked it out. Clark tore out fences and plowed up the entire farm. An auction disposed of unneeded equipment and cattle.

Clark also got expert advice on the kind of grass to use from Polk County Extension Agent Grover Hahn.

The first nine was completed in 1961. Clark called in experts to design the second nine which was developed in 1963.

"It was quite a change for the Clark family because we had always been farmers," he said. "My father, who was 77 at the time, agreed to the new venture — quite a change of direction."

The elder Clark still buzzes around



Bob Clark and son, Bob, check daily job schedule.

the course in a golf cart and even shoots a round or two now and then.

The old cow barn now serves as a shed for golf carts. A modern pro shop has been added.

Known as Willow Creek, the bustling course is one of the most attractive in Iowa. A creek that used to be a watering spot for Clark's 24 Holsteins, has been dammed to make lakes and provide hazards for the

linksters. Its also a source of irrigation for the course.

In 1965, Clark took another major step by instituting a sod farm alongside the course.

So successful has the operation been that Clark is searching for more acreage to grow sod.

"We're about at the saturation point for our sod business," he said. "The sod farm came as an offshoot

Clark and son, Dan, review golf course maintenance projects. Course and lake are in background.





Clark's sod business started small, with sales doubling each year. He sold more than 60 acres in '71.

of the golf course and now is coming into its own as another major source of income."

Clark said that the sod business has doubled every year, reaching 40 acres in 1970. He sold more than 60 acres this season.

The sod farm covers 130 acres of Kentucky Bluegrass for sale on both the retail and wholesale levels. His customers are contractors and home-builders as well as individuals who merely want to make repairs in their yards.

"It takes one to three years to grow grass on the sod we sell," Clark said. "The weather is the determining factor because we don't irrigate the sod farm."

Most of the approximately 25 employees are members of the Clark clan.

"It's a family team," said Clark. "We like each other and get along surprisingly well. All live on or near the golf course. I'd be lost without these people."

Clark's wife, Ardis, is his No. 1 assistant. Two daughters, Susan, 22, and Lori, 12, work in the clubhouse. Sons Bob, 24, and Dan, 14, do "anything and everything" around the course and sod farm. Clark's sister, Mrs. Mary Acheson, is the bookkeeper. One of her sons, Kent, manages the sod farm; another, Sam, has worked for Clark since he was eleven and is marrying a girl who used to work at the clubhouse. Two more of Clark's nephews, brothers Bill and Jim Baumberger, have also worked for him. About the only nonrelative is Dale Foster, grounds superintendent.

Of his sod operation, Clark says, "We sell it any way the customer wants it — cut, rolled, delivered and laid. We'll even prepare the ground for laying."

The workhorse machine in his equipment stable is a Massey-Ferguson MF 20 industrial tractor equipped with a scraper. "We do everything with this combination," Clark said. "During the season it goes nearly 12 hours a day. When we get caught up on the sod farm, we put it to work mowing the golf course."

Weather and workers are Clark's biggest problems.

"It's hard to get the kind of help you need — the ones who want to work," he said. "Also, we have a seasonal operation and can't keep a full work force on hand all year. This means we lose a lot of people from year to year and have to spend valuable time training new workers."

Plant diseases and weeds posed an early threat to both operations, but Clark said that experts from Diamond Shamrock Chemical Company recommended application of

Dacthal and Daconil. "They did the trick," he said.

Clark said he is still looking for new enterprises to be spawned by the golf course.

"The course provides only a fair income," he said. "We need to branch out more. What we have now enables us to hold this high priced land together and possibly get more. We feel we are just scratching the surface of the potential offered here."

Sod operation has been successful. Clark is now seeking more land to expand.

