

# TURF'S GRANDAME

It's really not a new trend for women to work as golf course superintendents. Just ask Virgie Ross.

A great-grandmother to four girls (she has two daughters, and two granddaughters), Ross retired from Homewood Golf Course, in Ames, Iowa, just four years ago.

In 1974, Ross became Iowa's first woman superintendent and one of the first women in the country to hold such a position.

"I lost my husband and I needed a job," she remembers. "The parks and recreation director had faith in me. He told me his demands, and I really had to work to be a Class A superintendent."

With old-fashioned savvy, Ross pioneered work in an area few women chose as a career. She inherited the job from her husband, Gerald, who died mowing greens in '74. But where another woman might look for more traditionally female work, Ross went to the parks and recreation director and asked for the job.

The physical labor involved was no problem. After all, she and Gerald had farmed together for more than 20 years, and she loved working outside.

## Not for men only

In fact, because of her farming background, she never thought twice about the job being for men only.

"My feeling is that women can be in this as well as men," she says. "I come from an era where women were supposed to be careful lifting things. Sure, maybe they won't pick up a 100-pound bag, but then they can take two buckets and just carry smaller loads at a time."

By her definition, her career started in a one-room country school house in Winfield, Iowa, in the '30's, when she met Gerald. They married in 1937.

The two worked closely together at whatever task they undertook. They gave up farming in the '60's, several years after Gerald suffered his first heart attack.

They moved to Columbus Junction, Iowa, where Virgie ran a cafe and Gerald sold hog feed and worked at a gas station. The local banker was chairman of the golf course board and approached Gerald



Virgie Ross helped pioneer women working as superintendents. This photo was taken before her retirement four years ago.

with a superintendent's job.

## The Musser 'bible'

He jumped at the chance and started attending seminars and reading everything he could on the subject. "Musser's old turf management book was his bible," Virgie remembers. "I thought he had it memorized."

In 1971, he wrote to Homewood Golf Course in Ames, Iowa, interviewed on a Wednesday and by the following Monday, they had moved to Ames.

Three years later, after Gerald's death, Virgie began running the course, attending classes, and becoming active in the GCSAA.

"I walked into one of the first meetings. They were playing golf, and they said, 'You can't play today. This is for golf course superintendents.' I said, 'I am a superintendent,'" Ross says.

But the job didn't go as smoothly as she thought it would. "The man who hired me believed in women being in men's work, if they can handle it," she says. "But he

moved to California and they hired another guy who resented me very much."

Her boss' prejudice against women forced her to retire when she turned 65.

"I wouldn't be sitting in this empty mobile home by myself if I hadn't had that boss," she says. "I resent drawing Social Security when I could be working. I can still sit on a tractor and mow grass."

Despite the loss of her job, she stays active with the GCSAA, handling the state newsletter, and attending national conferences.

Today, Ross says, Iowa has nine women superintendents. With fewer than 100 nationwide, Iowa may lead the country in the number of women running courses.

Women, she says, have a knack for detail, which can help beautify any golf course. And, as far as men working with women, she makes one simple statement:

"If they're a MAN—that's with capital letters—they won't resent it."

—Heide Aungst