Dewey Brown: Superintendent, Professional, Gentleman

by the Editors of THE GOLF SUPERINTENDENT

This picture of Dewey Brown was taken at GCSAA's 1973 International Turfgrass Conference and Show in Boston. *Photo courtesy of Melvin B. Lucas, Jr.*

Every sport has its special people, men and women whose names come to mind automatically when we think of the game they represent. This holds true in the world of golf, which has had its share of outstanding human beings. The late Dewey Brown—golf course owner, superintendent and professional of the Cedar River Golf Club in Indian Lake, N.Y.—was one of these. When he died on December 22, 1973, many expressions of personal loss came from people throughout the golf world.

Everyone who had known Dewey was enriched by the association. Dewey loved golf, wanted to see it played in a sportsmanlike way, and inspired countless others with his dedication to playing the game and running a golf course the way he lived his life—as a gentleman. Everyone who had known him, from his colleagues in the golf world to his youngest grandchild, agree on one fact: "Dewey Brown was a real gentleman."

He started in the golf business early in life. At the age of 8 he held his first caddy job, at the Madison (N.J.) Golf Club. He had been born on a farm in North Carolina but had moved with his family to New Jersey as a small boy. He traveled a long way from his childhood days in the early part of the century, when he made a dollar a day for 10 hours' work cutting fairways with a horse-drawn mower, to the October day in 1972 when he was honored by the Cedar River Golf Club members as "Knight of the Fairways" on Dewey Brown Day at his own golf club.

During those years of his youth and into manhood, Dewey caddied, hand-fashioned golf clubs, became a professional while still in his late teens, married and raised three sons, ran a farm, owned a catering business, and eventually bought the Cedar River Golf Club and Hotel in 1947.

Not long before he died, Dewey reminisced about his long and distinguished career in golf with his good friend, Robert W. Oechsle of the Aquatrols Corporation of America, who calls Dewey Brown "a dear friend and the most gentle person I have ever met." The conversation was taped and transcribed and we have excerpted some passages from Dewey's reminiscences.—THE EDITORS.

I started to caddy in 1907. Caddy fees at that time were 15 cents for 9 holes and 25 cents for 18 holes and you were lucky if you got a tip. We were usually allowed to play on Monday morning and, of course, that was the highlight of the week.

I worked many years for George Low at Baltusrol Golf Club doing shop work in the spring and fall mainly making clubs. Summers were spent at Shawnee-on-the-Delaware. I must not forget the Simson Brothers, the Gourley Brothers and Willie Norton. He [Norton] came over to this country in 1894 [from the British Isles] and played in the first U.S. Open Championship. I think that was in 1895. I had the pleasure of playing golf with all of them. I was then about 16 or 17, and I got into the golf profession through their encouragement.

In 1916 I went to work for Tom Hucknell at the Morris County (N.J.) Golf Club and started to serve my apprenticeship as a golf professional. And I worked for Willie Norton for two years.

In the early 1920's I joined the PGA and am still a member. [He was also a member of GCSAA from 1958 to the time of his death.] I stopped using knickers in the early thirties, but my black and white golf shoes are still fashionable.

Dewey talked about the people he met in those days when much of golf was a game for the rich and the famous:

Entertaining was much more elaborate in the old days. The golf club set did most of its entertaining at home. It was not uncommon for the rich to entertain 100 people in their homes. I remember Mr. Vanderbilt. I used to caddy steady for his granddaughter, Miss Ruth Twombley, at the Morris County Golf Club. Miss Twombley and her friends would come from New York on a railroad car and there was a siding to take her right to the mansion. When the group came to the Madison Golf Club, Miss Twombley would drive the "tally ho" coach with four horses. She would lead and the rest of the guests would follow.

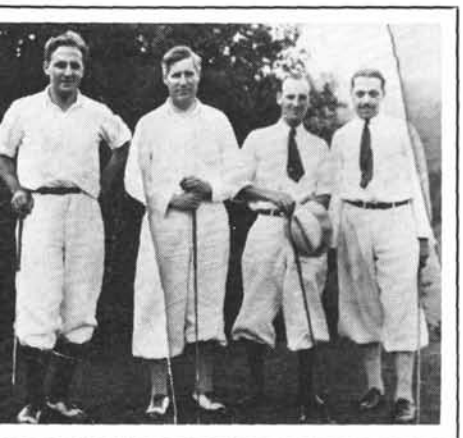
I remember Mr. John D. Rockefeller. He had a home down at Lakewood, N.J., with his own private golf course. Lakewood was quite a winter resort.

My old boss, Willie Norton played with him [Rockefeller] and gave him lessons at both Lakewood Golf Club and his own private course. The old gentleman used to like to play at his own course.

I knew Mr. Rockefeller only in the autumn of his life. He was very accurate, didn't hit the ball far, very concentrated. If he made a date to play golf, regardless of the weather, and his partner did not arrive promptly, he would tee up, hit the ball and go on playing. Those who arrived later would have to catch up with him on the golf course. When he'd come to pick up his clubs in the morning, he would give you a dime tip. I feel that all the publicity that he received concerning his dime tips was absolutely true.

The first time I ever saw anyone arrive by plane to play golf was at Shawnee-on-the-Delaware, right after World War I. Casey Jones would fly up to Shawnee and land

Left: Dressed in golfing attire of the era, Dewey Brown shows his golfing stance in the early 30's. **Below:** This foursome at Shawnee-on-the-Delaware in 1928 includes, left to right: Ed Gorbish, Ed Worthington, Eddie Seaford and Dewey Brown.



Dewey (second from left) poses among another foursome at Winged Foot Golf Club in 1941. His companions are, left to right: W. R. Booth, Bill Brown and J. A. Coomy.

on the upper island, where a boat would pick him up and bring him over to the club.

A number of baseball players enjoyed the game of golf. One of the ball players I knew real well was George Ernshaw of the Philadelphia Athletics. Then there was Al Simmons, Jimmy Foxx and Mickey Cochrane. I played a lot of golf with Rube Walberg, the pitcher. Many of them golfed in the 70's.

Dewey thought about greenkeeping in the early days:

My first experience at cutting fairways was at the Madison (N.J.) Golf Club. On this 9-hole course, we had only one horse and a fairway unit with a cut of about 30 inches. We put leather boots on him [the horse] every morning to keep him from tearing up the turf. Sitting on the horse all day, I would find myself time and again falling asleep and almost falling off.

The fairways were not as wide; there was more rough. The help put in 9 or 10 hours a day and there were no coffee breaks. At noon you got a half hour off. At 12:30 you started to work, not just get ready to work—you started!

Fairways were bluegrass and fescues and were cut from an inch to an inch and a half high. There was no watering of fairways. During World War I, many courses had sheep on the fairways to keep the grass down. If you found your ball in a place where the sheep hadn't nibbled, you played it out of there. There was never concern about manicuring the golf course as there is now. Golfers played the course as they found it. Possibly, it was similar to the way golf is played in Scotland today.

The players of those days would score equally as well as the players of today. They were better shot makers because they were required to play all different types of shots due to the condition of the course.

On TV or radio, it seems some professional has to make a comment about the greens or the fairways. The demands are greater than what the superintendent can accomplish. I don't think the pro should dictate how the golf course should be. If he's invited to play in a tournament, he should play the course. If conditions are not to your liking or the course is not in the best of condition, then play the game according to the way you have always played it.

During World War I, I remember using the first powered greens mower at Shawnee-on-the-Delaware when I worked with Willie Norton. We used a Worthington "Overgreen," a three-gang unit that one horse could pull.

And I remember brown patch. The only thing we had to open up the green was a hand spiker. Sometimes it would take two men to operate it, one man pulling and one man pushing. We used an iron rake on matted and thatched areas.

The main problem in summer months was the elimination of crabgrass. This was a hand job and caddy boys were generally hired to do it. Strings were laid across the greens and they were responsbile for cutting all the grass in the path with a knife. When they were done, they moved the string over and started on a new path.

Some courses were mowed every day. One man would take care of three greens, tees and traps. Grass was cut about ½ inch high. After World War I they started cutting them closer.

My first full-time greenkeeping job was back in the thirties at the Rockaway River Country Club in New Jersey. I had the golf club, the golf course and the pro's job. From there I went over to the Knoll Club at Boonton, N.J.

Dewey commented upon the game of golf and his work as a professional:

I feel the fundamentals of golf still apply today. My idea of teaching golf is to teach the person. One of the first things I did was to check the golfer's grip. If he had never played, we'd start with the grip, the stance, then I'd start him swinging. I tried to perfect a swing that would be suited to each golfer. I feel putting is a part of the golf game where confidence plays the greatest role—regardless of how you stroke the ball when putting it; if you have the confidence, you generally putt well.

In the early days, most bunkers had brown sand and they were harder to play out of than the shallow traps of today. With the clubs of that era it was quite a feat to get the shot out of the trap and up over the bunker. We used the niblick, which is the 9 iron of today. Of course, the traps were not maintained and manicured as they are today. One popular hole at many courses was the "punchbowl" hole.

I've had four holes-in-one in my lifetime. I remember one of them It was closing day at Shawnee and we were on the last hole. It was late in the evening; we could just see to finish. Tee markers were back where it measured about 235

yards. I used a driver and wound up with a hole-in-one.

[*Dewey Brown hit his last hole-in-one in October of 1965 in the tournament of the Northeastern GCSA at the Taconic Golf Club, Williamstown, Mass.*—THE EDITORS.]

Up to World War I the only things you'd find in a golf pro shop were golf clubs and golf balls. I made my first wooden clubs out of persimmon blocks. We would take our files and saw and work them down and shape them. When they were the way we wanted, we would weigh the club in a groove in the back of the head, almost in the shape of a canoe—pointed at each end and with ⅛-inch holes drilled into the block. Then we'd pour the lead. Of course we could put more lead in or take some out.

After we started putting soles on the bottom of the clubs, we could even weigh them on the bottom too. When I first started making clubs, the driver did not have a sole on it but the brassie and spoon did. We finished a club with what we called "pappen." First, the club was grained by wetting it with water; then it was stained. Then we'd cap it with a cloth covered with shellac and a touch of linseed oil. We'd rub it over the head many times until it got nice and shiny—enough to resist moisture.

Back in the early days of the wood shaft, any golf professional or assistant pro who was a good club maker could always get a good job. More of a premium was placed on being a club maker and instructor than a player. The purses in the tournaments were small. It was common to go out and play an exhibition match for $25 or $50. This was considered a lot of money in those days.

In the early days, the pros didn't get the run of the clubhouse. They really didn't get this privilege until Walter Hagen broke that old policy in England. Walter Hagen is the man responsible for opening the front door of the clubhouse to the golf professional.

There are four sets of clubs I will never forget: two for President Harding and two for Vice President Dawes. After we finished making these clubs we stamped on the back of the irons: THE HONORABLE WARREN G. HARDING and THE HONORABLE CHARLES G. DAWES. These were made in Jimmy Donaldson's Golf Shop at Fenamore Country Club. We received a letter from the President and Vice President stating that the clubs were "very satisfactory—an outstanding job."

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"An outstanding job." These words seem to sum up the way Dewey Brown lived his life and contributed to the world of golf.

Dewey's love for the game of golf lives on in his family. His middle son, Dewey Jr., is now the proprietor at the Cedar River Hotel and Golf Club, of which he is also golf course superintendent. The eldest son, Roland, is an electrical engineer for the government in Fort Monmouth, N.J., and the youngest, Edward, is on the administrative staff at Farleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey. They're all excellent golfers.

Dewey Jr. learned both the golf and the hotel business from his father. In Dewey Sr.'s younger days, the golf pro with a family to feed had to have another job. Mr. and Mrs. Brown had a farm near the golf courses where Dewey worked. Dewey Jr. recalls, "One of the first things I remember about my father was watching him get up early to milk the cows on our farm. Then he'd change his clothes and go off to the golf course."

Later, the Browns operated a well-known catering service and restaurant in New Jersey. In fact, Dewey ran the restaurant until only a few years before his death. His son remembers, "My mother finally convinced him it was too much and he gave it up." The Browns would cater the food at the clubhouse of whatever golf club Dewey was working at the time. And when he bought the historic Cedar River House in 1947, he continued to handle all the food management. He was a connoisseur of fine food and gourmet cooking.

Talking about his father's involvement in golf as a way of life, Dewey Jr. sums up Dewey Sr.'s test of a real golfer: "No matter how great a golfer you were, it meant nothing to him if you weren't a gentleman. You had to be a gentleman." ■