

Sports

Leo Collins: 62 years of dedication

LOON LAKE — When workers at the Loon Lake Inn Golf Course were dismantling an old rain shelter recently, they came across a beam on which were carved the words "Leo Collins, 1922."

Normally such a discovery would lead to thoughts about the era in which the man lived; what brought him to the course and where he went afterward; what happened to him in the 62 years since.

Not so at Loon Lake. To answer these questions the work crew had only to peer down the fairway. There stood Leo Collins — Loon Lake's 77-year-old monument to longevity, commitment and hard work.

Last year the people of Loon Lake paid tribute to Leo Collins and gave him a plaque which said in part, "There would be no golf course without your lifetime of dedication."

Leo started at the club in 1922 when he was 16. He was hired at \$2 a day to work on the construction of a second nine holes at the Loon Lake Hotel Golf Course, which originally opened in 1895. In its heyday the hotel and camp complex employed 500 people to care for 1,000 summer guests.

After working on the course that year he went through stints in the hotel's carpentry, plumbing and mechanic shops. In the late 1920's he was called to the boss's office.

"I thought, oh-oh, what have I done now," Leo recalled as he sat on the tailgate of his truck one recent afternoon. "But when I got there she (Mary Chase, the hotel's owner) asked me to take over the golf course."

He has remained ever since, through seven separate changes of ownership — not all of them cooperative, he will tell you — and every conceivable sort of weather.

"I was the only one to stick with them," he laughed.

North Country Fairways

By Shawn Tooley

With each new owner usually came a new course, "expert." After one or two calamities, however — including when the grass was cut so short the greens were reduced to barren spots of brown dirt — the experts all turned to Leo.

When the hotel burned in 1956, its absentee owners were willing to let the golf course lay idle while they redeveloped the tourist facilities. Leo, who had since been named caretaker of the entire complex, would not allow the course to fall apart.

"I just wanted to keep it from going to hay," he said. For the next two years he mowed and weeded the greens and looked after the course as if it was still open. When it did reopen, of course, Leo was there to tend to it.

"Always fit and trim, Leo still cuts an impressive figure. Although easily 50 years their senior, he keeps the four-man work crew moving without resistance. They know that what Leo says goes as far as the Loon Lake Golf Course is concerned.

Spry doesn't adequately describe a 77-year-old man who splits and hauls 35 to 40 cords of wood each spring and just built an addition to his house. He's played golf for years but hasn't had a chance to get this year.

"I'd rather be out there making sure everything is working," he said. The secret of his longevity is simple, Leo claims.

"Half of it is to keep going and not eat too much meat. I've never been much of a meat eater," he comments. The other half of the secret, apparently, remains under wraps.

Running a golf course hasn't changed much over the years, he says, except that "some of the equipment is not as good." A visitor to the course will eventually run into a 1935 tractor Leo has kept going all these years.

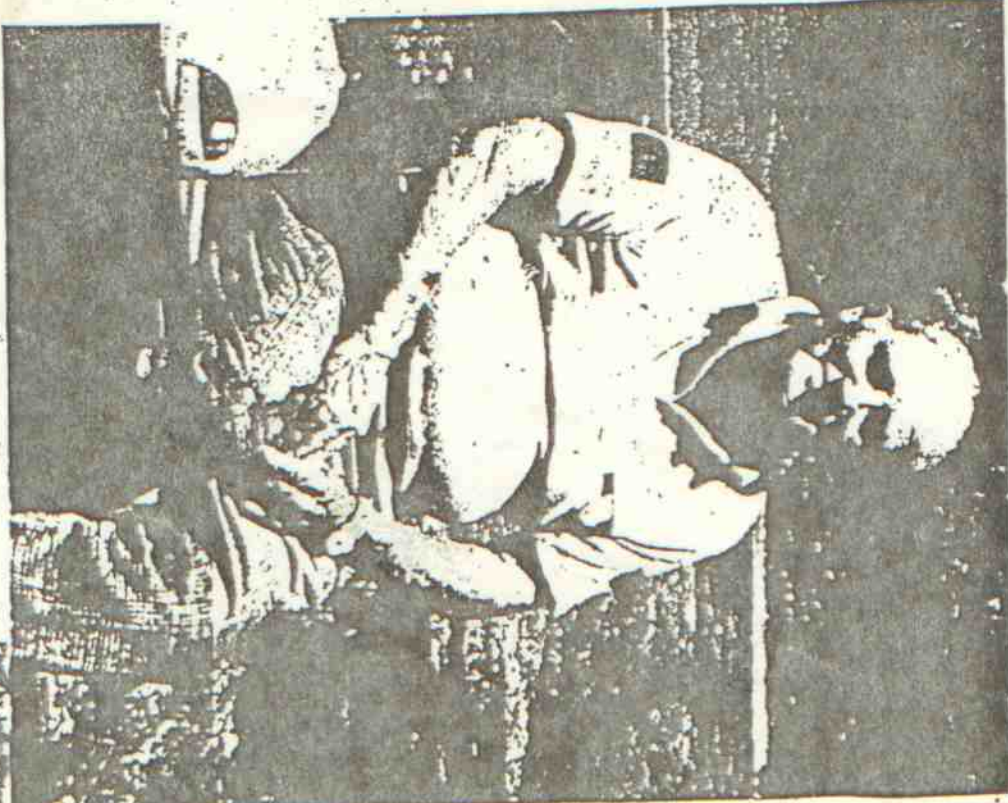
Some upkeep methods have gone by the way, others have not. In 1922 horses were still used to pull fairway mowers and cow manure was spread as fertilizer. Neither can be seen today.

"But I work on the greens the same way I did 50 years ago," Leo observed. Weeding, fertilizing and watering are his secrets — and Loon Lake is best known for its good greens.

The club's owner, Tony D'Elia, has urged him to slow down. But, Leo says, "I wouldn't want the job if I couldn't work."

D'Elia is faced with a problem. "It's going to be tough to get these young guys to learn the job for when Leo retires." D'Elia observed. "I think when Leo quits, I'll quit too." Surveying the majestic fairways that have been his main interest for 62 years, Leo is unmoved.

"I've had to learn over the years," he says. "They can too."



STILL GETTING AROUND — Leo Collins peaches on the tailgate of the pickup he uses to get around at the Loon Lake Golf Course.