



Bob & Clarita Wooldridge – HMGC Lobby 1992

Bob Wooldridge – a personal reflection from Ed McFalls

I first met Bob Wooldridge in July, 1982 shortly after a holding company of Fidelity Bank acquired Hershey's Mill from the Crockett organization. I had seen him several times as he and his financial guru Rob Lewis visited Hershey's Mill several times beginning in January, 1982 as they were consulting for Fidelity Bank, as a favor to the bank's lending officer, on how to fix a very troubled real estate asset. I was a maintenance person for what would become the Master Association (jobs for college history majors were tough to come by in 1979 when I graduated from Penn State). We met on the patio of what is now #5 Hershey's Drive in Westbrook Village, but was then the Administration building. I was at the end of his interviewing all existing staff to see who he would keep, and who would be departing. All senior management and construction personnel would be gone in a few weeks. I was 24 years old, he was 39. He said, "I hear you change light bulbs and do other maintenance. What else can you do?" "Anything you need" was my response. He asked me to draft a letter to the residents about why he had to let the Activities Director go. When I presented my handwritten draft (in the days before personal computers when secretaries used IBM typewriters), he said, "If you can write like this, you will be invaluable to me."

Bob was not a golfer. He was a swimmer, water skier (even did barefoot without skis), sailor, licensed pilot, snow skier, racquetball player among many other pursuits. For many years, he and I would head out over lunch hour to a local racquetball facility to battle it out on the court. We issued each other trophies at the end of each year.

Bob loved flying. In my sheltered life, I had never flown in an airplane before meeting Bob. He was a pilot and co-owned a Beechcraft KingAir turboprop with none other than baseball legend Reggie Jackson. I got to meet Reggie a couple of times in our office in what is now Westbrook Village. One Saturday early in his time here he called me and said "Do you want to go flying?" We flew all over the area and did "touch and go" landing practice at both Philadelphia and Wilmington airports. After a year or two of our association in PA, he took me on my first commercial flight to handle a homeowners association meeting at one of his associations in California.

Our lead lender at Fidelity Bank was an avid golfer and a member at Aronimink Golf Club. Since Bob was not a golfer, he told me, "Whenever that guy wants to golf, you go golf." So I got to frequently entertain the lender at HMGC, plus he regularly had me over to Aronimink. On an October day in 1986, we played at another club, the lender asked me to have Bob Wooldridge join us for lunch at Malvern Meeting House where he outlined on a napkin how Wooldridge should acquire HM from Fidelity Bank's subsidiary. That transaction happened on Dec. 30, 1986.

Newer current residents and members would not recognize the HMGC Golf Course compared to what existed in the early days. While not a golfer, Bob always agreed to the improvements that Jerred Golden and the Board brought before him. The fairway of #16 was the first to be re-built. Originally built with a crowned slope and almost no trees on either side behind the houses of Brighton and Chatham and a drainage ditch across the fairway in the landing zone, it was a genuine challenge to keep any ball hit off center from rolling out of bounds. The entire fairway was scooped out with mounds and bunkers built on either side. Trees were planted up and down both sides to help keep balls in play. As years passed, severely sloped greens on Holes #2, 3, 6, 7 and 8 were all fully reconstructed to become more playable. Hole #2, which was originally a right angle dog-leg right par 4 was re-aligned to add the pond and tees closer to Mill Road and stretched into a par 5. Subsequently, tee complexes were re-built on #3, 5, 9, 10, 11 and 18 while new greens were also built at #5, 10 and 17.

While only a small percentage of current residents and members had much contact with him, the early residents saw much more of him. The first three years here – in 1982, 1983 and 1984 – Bob and Clarita hosted open house wine and cheese receptions during December in the Main Hall of Winfield Hall (now the Community Center) where they would stand shaking hands and exchanging holiday greetings with hundreds of residents for a couple hours, and then they would take some senior staff to dinner in West Chester. At the dinner in 1984, Bob announced to the other staff that he was promoting me to Vice President of the organization.

In the mid-1980s the club was growing so fast that by 1985 it was necessary to close the membership to any non-residents. We needed golf memberships to help sell houses going forward. Also, the dining areas and bar were too small to support the members. Bob and I worked with the architect, Board and staff to plan the much needed expansion and Clarita planned the interior decorating. New walls started going up in the fall of 1990, and the clubhouse closed after the Gala New Year's Eve celebration. Over the next six months, the Fairway Room was added, the Banquet space was increased by 40% with a permanent bar added, one of the six hotel style rooms was demolished and became the bar lounge and another room on the other side of the hall was demolished to allow for a much larger entrance lobby with a fountain/waterfall, the kitchen was dramatically increased and the lower level saw much larger locker rooms, new restrooms and enhanced storage. The clubhouse was expanded from 16,000 to 24,000 square feet and a grand re-opening celebration was held in July, 1991. The day before the opening, Bob, Clarita and I were inspecting everything and Chef Steve brought out some hors d'oeuvres for us to enjoy. Lots of members and residents were coming up and looking in the windows. Finally, Bob said I'm going to give this one couple a preview. He opened the door to the deck and invited them in. It turned out to be Darrell Sifford – a nationally syndicated columnist for the Inquirer – and his wife Marilyn who had “moved to the suburbs” in Kennett Village. He and Bob struck up a friendship that lasted until Darrell's untimely passing.

After the shopping center was built and the final homes completed, Bob found less and less reason to come to Pennsylvania. He talked regularly with various members of the staff. When health issues first surfaced in 2017, we actually talked more as he wanted to impart philosophy about the future of the Pennsylvania operation. In October of 2018, he had the company board elect me as president and I traveled to California in early 2019 to talk with he and his family about transitions and continuing operations when he would no longer be with us.

Since the early days in 1982, I always admired Bob Wooldridge's sharp mind, his easy grasp of figures, his desire to do things right, his desire to create value and his genuine compassion for his staff. He was a boss, a mentor and a friend to me. I shall miss him greatly.