



# Vicksburg Blessed by Angels Crossing

By Dianna Stampfer

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**When Angels Crossing opened earlier this summer, it was an answer to a prayer for many Vicksburg residents.**

The community, which had been devastated by the closing of the Fox River Paper Co. in April 2001, found inspiration in the ideas of a local farmer named Bob Thompson. The golf course and its proposed housing development, which sits on former mill property on W Avenue, has revived not only the land but the moral of the community as well.

The mill closing left 250 people without jobs and eliminated 23 percent of the township tax base. The 900 acres, including a factory building, sat vacant with little hope for a future. That was, until Thompson — who maintained 750 acres of the property for the mill — started thinking aloud. He knew the land like the back of his hand, and he had vision.

"We'd always joked that area would be good for a golf course," Thompson said. "But we never thought about the mill closing."

When a business decision on the part of Fox River resulted in the closing, there were just two options. "We could have done nothing or picked up the pieces and made something out of a bad situation" said Thompson. "I've always been pro-active and it made a lot of sense to do something positive."

Thompson's idea took on a life of its own. He asked Darin Philport, who'd grown up in Vicksburg and was now general manager of the Hidden River Golf & Casting Club in Northern Michigan, to recommend a golf course designer. Philport punched up W. Bruce Matthews III on his cell phone and handed it to Thompson. Matthews, the third generation golf course architect who had designed Hidden

River, jumped at the opportunity. He toured the Vicksburg property and made a rough sketch of a course.

Thompson then made a leap of faith in contacting Robert C. Buchanan, chairman of the board for Fox River, to share his idea and Matthews' course concept. The privately-owned, family company out of Appleton, Wis., felt compelled to give something back to the community that was devastated by the plant closing. Thompson's idea of a golf course and housing community seemed like the perfect opportunity to do just that.

Before long, Thompson and his wife, Jill, purchased the former mill land as well as the building. Fox River then became the first investor in the project, followed by a group of civic-minded individuals looking for a way to restore quality-of-life to the community with the \$1.8 million project. The project moved along quickly thanks to the leadership at both the village and township levels. Angels Crossing is an inspiration to what can happen when intergovernmental cooperation exists to move forward toward a positive future.

The next step was the final design concept. Matthews was challenged to build an upscale, yet affordable course. Since this was his first signature course, he took charge of the challenge and formal plans were drawn up for a 27-hole golf course and housing development to include 98 executive home sites on the west nine in the Greensborough neighborhood and 24 Bridgeview Condominiums overlooking wetlands and native areas.

Was Thompson thinking about the glamorous life, being the owner of the next affordable "must play" course in Michigan? Absolutely not. He drew his inspiration for the project from the community, wanting to create something



they could share in and be proud of. By offering housing options and affordable golf — at just \$38 for 18 holes with cart on the weekends — he could do his part rebuild the quality-of-life for the bruised community. Already this summer, 38 kids have taken part in golf programs through Community Education. Angels Crossing will also serve as the home course for the high school golf team.

Area golfers are talking up Angels Crossing as a golf destination as well, which can only help boost the local economy as word-of-mouth about the course spreads. Angels Crossing is one of the latest courses to open in Michigan, which leads the nation in the number of golf courses (800+) and in new course openings each year. Michigan's golf industry is said to generate nearly \$2 billion annually.

Opening Angels Crossing in 2004 signifies a centennial celebration. It was in 1904 when the first paper mill opened at this Vicksburg site. In 1904, golf was still an elite sport. Angels Crossing was designed with the look and feel of golf's "Golden Age," with characteristics similar to Long Island courses from the early 1900s.

The course sits on rolling land and features dramatic elevation changes, ponds and native trees and grasses. The first 18 holes are situated on 350 acres overlooking Portage Creek and Barton Lake.

"We followed ridges and moved only 60,000 to 70,000 yards of dirt," Matthews said of the first course. "The property is at the eastern end of Michigan's only prairie and that's why the soil is so good. The top 12 to 14 inches is sandy loam which makes for good drainage."

In designing Angels Crossing, Matthews created a true work of art, blending large, rolling greens, generous fairways and bold bunkering overlooking the native wetlands and prairie grasses, creating an exceptional experience for all levels of play. The greens average 10,000 square feet with some considerable movement. The bunkers are steep and deep and the holes are unique unto themselves.

"Each site has a history that can be worked into the game," Matthews said. "The pine stump hedge row, hidden beneath trees and pines, the silo of the old farm the moss-covered stones from the farmer's field, are all assets to the sense of place. Golfers highly value the setting because golf is not merely a game, it is an opportunity to enjoy the outdoors and the ever-changing patterns of nature. The strategy of the game, interwoven with the property, provides all skill levels a unique experience."

Angels Crossing offers five sets of tees, measuring 4,845 yards from the forward tees to 7,169 yards from the championship tees. For high handicappers and those who are distance challenged, there isn't a single forced carry from the forward two sets of tees.

"Angels Crossing is challenging yet fun for beginners to experienced golfers," Matthews said. "It is a very forgiving course on the front but challenging if you step back. The course doesn't reveal itself the first time you play it, it takes a couple of rounds before you get the full experience."

The third nine, scheduled to open by 2006, will abut the housing development that completes the community at Angels Crossing. Among the other future projects are banquet and meeting facilities, casual dining restaurant, lounge, practice facility, target greens, practice bunkers and shortgame area.

## Unique Features

Heading out from the clubhouse to the first tee, you'll come to a charming covered bridge, measuring about 80 feet in length. A second covered bridge, en route to the practice area and the 9-hole course development, measures about 40 feet. Both bridges were roofed with galvanized tin taken from the mill.

More than two miles of wooden boardwalk can be found at Angels Crossing, getting you safely from one hole to the next through the marshlands and a colorful array of wildflowers.

Two buffalo-shaped fairway bunkers can be found on the left side of the 9th hole. Since Thompson's nickname is "Buffalo Bob," Matthews thought the added design element was fitting.

A Chapel is planned for the east side of the property, near a village cemetery. In addition to being a nice amenity for the community, it will be used for weddings and other special events.

## What About the Name?

The name was Jill's idea. Looking for something other than the oaks, pines and maples that adorn so many course names, Jill — who collects angel figurines — thought of the transition, from closed mill to the community renaissance that sparked the golf course and residential development, as angels crossing. A small community cemetery sits by the course entrance. There's a rail line running alongside the property at Angels Crossing, which once serviced the mill. The railroad connection continues, as Jill's father and grandfather were railmen. These elements all came together in the name and the logo for Angels Crossing, as the angel carries a railroad lantern to light the way.

## The Staff

Jim Thompson, Bob's brother, has been brought in as the general manager and resident golf historical for Angels Crossing. He was previously a controller for Clearbrook Golf Club in Saugatuck.

Mike Hill, a native of Vicksburg, is director of golf services. He's had previous stints at Milham Park Golf Club and Eastern Hills Golf, both in Kalamazoo.

Roger Barton is golf course superintendent. With more than 30 years experience, he got his start at Grand Haven Golf Club under the original Bruce Matthews, Barton went on to stints at the Country Club in Dearborn, Blythfield Country Club in Grand Rapids and the Pohl Cat in Mt. Pleasant, before floating in to Angels Crossing. He is a member of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America and three time President of its Western Michigan Chapter.

Angels Crossing  
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