

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE PORTLAND YACHT CLUB

The Portland Yacht Club was organized on April 26, 1869, in the office of W. W. Thomas at 184 1/2 Middle Street. The great Portland Fire had all but eliminated the city just three years before, leveling 1,500 homes. General U. S. Grant was President and James G. Blaine, "The Man From Maine," was Speaker of the House of Representatives. There were 121 members that first year. The initiation fee was \$2.00, and dues were \$1.00 a year.

The first Commodore, James Merrill Churchill, had as flagship the schooner "Ethel," scaling 67 feet. (Mr. Churchill later became the first full consul to Cuba and is buried there, in Cardenas.) The initial fleet numbered fifteen yachts: seven schooners, seven sloops, and one steamer.

Meetings were held at the offices of various members until 1873, when a Clubroom was rented on Custom House Wharf for \$8.30 a month. This room had a balcony overlooking the Club anchorage on the Cape shore. The members furnished and decorated the room.

The first Club flag was rectangular with a wide red border and a blue number in a white field, the number being the one given a member as he signed the Club roll.

In 1878, the Club was incorporated — a copy of the incorporation paper is on display in our present Clubhouse.

There has been some question as to the relative age of the Club. According to Fox's Yachting Annual in 1878, PYC was the seventh in a listing of 24 clubs. Mr. P. W. Stephens, a yachting historian, stated PYC was fifteenth. Lloyd's Register, considered the authority on such matters, placed PYC as thirteenth. It is said that many of the preceding clubs temporarily "went out of business" during the Great Depression.

Little Diamond Island was offered to the Club by the Deering heirs for rental of \$100/year. The Club voted to raise \$700.00 to build a Clubhouse there, but it never bore fruit.

In 1871 the design of the present Club burgee was adopted.

In 1877 there were 112 members — "active or indifferent." In 1880 the Club purchased a cannon for \$41.00 and voted "To neither borrow nor lend same." The coal bill that year was \$6.20 and cannon powder was \$21.60.

Cape Cottage, near what is now Fort Williams, was the scene of the tenth anniversary celebration, 65 attending, "38 being gentlemen."

A piece of ice was left each day at the Clubhouse for a season's cost of \$2.70. Reported 59 books in the library, "the nine best ones have been stolen." Club cruises were frequent to Potts Harbor.

In 1890 there were over a dozen naphtha launches in the Club. Most of them blew up.

Still problems with proper uniforms for officers. After many meetings it was voted to adopt the New York Yacht Club cap with leather visor. Apparently yachting interest subsided for a time as the 1891 report from the Regatta Committee states, "the yachting season of the Portland Yacht Club has been entirely devoid of interest." Commodore Bray served the Club almost 50 years. He was Commodore for 17 years in three separate terms, and when not holding that office was Fleet Surgeon. Club records up until 1900 were hand-written. At the Annual Meeting in 1895, there was a motion to refrain from having liquor at the Clubhouse or banquets. It was defeated 64-11. In 1897 the Club listed 68 yachts, five schooners, thirty sloops, one knockabout, nine cat boats, eight

steamers (one being 109'), fifteen of those naphtha launches, and 265 members. The report shows "Racing has never been the primary design of the Portland Yacht Club. Other clubs are forced, from sheer monotony, to cultivate this sport, but we have at our doors a coast which attracts all yacht clubs of the United States, have been blessed by our environment. Our shores present too great a charm in the pleasure of coasting."

In 1898 the harbor was cleared of all mines following the Spanish American War. In 1899, electric lights were installed in the Clubhouse. All bonds were paid off and the Club was free of debt. However, the Commodore finally appointed a committee to clean up the perennial bug-bear of unpaid dues. With a yearly fee of \$5.00, there was \$600.00 past due on the books, some in arrears for 5-6 years.

In 1903, first one design class. They were Starling(SP?) Burgess 31' gaff-rigged sloops of 18'. Also, voted to have a Club listing written by a Club secretary who was a printer, but when the Club demurred about paying for publication, he destroyed the material. Even the new 31-footers were not considered (can't read) and the Club talked about installing some pool tables for those members, "not interested in boating."

In 1916, the Club purchased a lot of land on the South Portland shore having 124' of water frontage at the foot of High Street for \$1,300.00. From 1905-1910, the Club records were lost, but membership grew to 394 members, twelve schooners, fifty-six sloops, six cat boats, thirteen racing dories, six steamers, twenty-seven power yachts and thirty-seven launches. On the cruise to Mackerel Cove records state "a native gave a demonstration of how to sink a yacht tender by ramming it with a Hampton boat, under power."

Voted to keep all records in a deposit box. It was not heeded and records from 1926-1938 are nowhere to be found.

In 1915, Reuben K. Dyer, Commodore, was made an honorary member of the Boston Yacht Club. Only Herreshoff, Lipton and Sec. Roosevelt had been so honored. Membership was 450. The Fiftieth anniversary was held at the Club in 1919 with no particular celebration. Each New Year's Eve was celebrated with cannon fire at midnight and other orgies. In 1919 they used 1/2 barrel of dynamite and the resulting din was pronounced real adequate. Admiral Peary, a member, died in 1920. On August 10, 1926, the Clubhouse was completely destroyed by fire. Everything the Club had treasured since 1869 was lost, all trophies, silver, cannons, all the half models and models of member's yachts, and furnishings. The building had been built in 1885. It was voted to rebuild on Merchants Wharf. The South Portland property was sold for \$2,500 in 1941. The harbor was closed in 1940. The Clubhouse was leased to the Coast Guard during the war.

In 1928, the first Monhegan Island race was held. Only five entries, starting and finishing off Town Landing. Commodore Vernon West's Sayonara II won the event. A half model of that yacht is hanging in our Dining Room, given to us by Hal Moore, whose brother helped organize the race. This race has grown to become one of the most popular yachting events in the Northeast. After the Second World War, a second race was included for smaller yachts under 30' called the Manana Island Race, which was 90 miles long, eliminating the let to Cape Porpoise. It was not uncommon to have a combined fleet of over 120 yachts participate. A Cruising division was added in 19--, a 60-mile event with only jib and main, called the Seguin Island Race.

After the War, the Clubhouse had deteriorated greatly and there was much unrest afoot. The initiation fees were reduced to \$10.00 and dues to \$5.00. The road to Merchants Wharf was almost impassable, the landlord would not repair same, and wanted to raise the rent. An invitation to combine with Centerboard Yacht Club was turned down. A new location in Falmouth was found, the Josselyn property off Old Powerhouse Road, which had water frontage and a presentable house. It was purchased for \$16,500. The old Clubhouse on Merchants Wharf was disposed of for \$2,500, a new pier was built for \$5,000, and twenty-two members were eager to sign on. Foreside

Yacht Club merged with PYC, dues went from \$5 to \$25. On January 8, 1947, the first meeting was held in the new location. An auxiliary location was located at Merrill's Wharf, not wanting to sever the ties in the harbor.

In 1949 there were 243 adult and 24 junior members. That year, in Larchmont, NY, Mrs. William Moody, skipper, and her crew, Mrs. James Boyd II, Mrs. Regis Gignoux, and Mrs. H. Dana Jones won the Adams Cup.

In 1951 there were twenty Turnabouts. The best commodores were the ones who could act as a catalyst between opposing interests such as power, racing, cruising, adults, children and prudence.

In 1954 Hurricane Carol caused great damage to the PYC fleet in excess of \$600,000. Twenty-one yachts sank, pier and floats damaged to the extent of \$10,000.

In 1956-57 sailing became of interest again. The New England Lightning Championship was held at the Club. Membership was 257 adults, and an addition was added at a cost of \$15,000.

In 1959, the Club purchased about one acre of land on the east side for \$16,000. Dues went to \$70.00. Membership was at 280. Nine Ospreys and twenty-five Turnabouts now in the fleet. A dog (not names) who had bitten three active members was denied further use of the Club premises.

In the 1960's and 1970's the 22' Ensign Class sloop was the popular one-design at the Club and around Casco Bay. In 1972, Merle Hallett won the Ensign Nationals, thereby bringing the event to PYC in 1973. The author was chairman of that event, which drew 33 boats and crews from Texas to Michigan. We even had Hull #1 on display at the float.

During the early sixties, the dining room was added, along with a suitable kitchen facility. In 1979, the total Clubhouse was rebuilt, moving the office from upstairs to down, adding a "Captain's Cabin" lounge and deck over the dining room. The Junior Yacht Club was moved out of the small building next to the Clubhouse into new quarters next to the Captain's Cabin. Total costs were approximately \$191,000. Club members and naval architect Lindsay Lord designed the new facilities.

Thursday evening informal "fun" sail races became really popular. It was not uncommon to have 60 boats out, followed by a buffet in the Clubhouse.

In 1983, PYC purchased the adjacent Bryant property behind the parking lot. It contained 82,000 square feet ± and cost \$100,000. The sellers took back a \$50,000 mortgage at 10% for 10 years. There were two assessments for \$80.00 each per member. In 1988 the Board of Directors shifted the management of Club operations to a Club manager, in order to better facilitate the many day-to-day activities that a volunteer Board was finding ever more difficult to do.

In 1991 the Club dining operation went from a catering operation, which had been in place for many years, to managing and doing our own food service through our own Club-employed personnel.

Records and bill-collecting went from a hand operation to computer for more efficiency.

In 1994 the Portland Yacht Club will be 125 years old, its single purpose of promoting boating and all the ramifications of yachting still intact.

H. Bud Singer (1991)
Past Commodore