

Introduction

For almost a century, the Bras d'Or Yacht club has stood at the Baddeck shoreline, greeter to all who enter the harbour.

The clubhouse - with its slipway, flagstaff and viewing verandas, are so much a part of the waterfront of Baddeck, that it is hard to image the community without it. But in fact, for the first decade of its existence, the Bras d'Or Yacht Club had no such home base. Meetings were held at Gertrude Hall, the courthouse and in member's main street offices. Minute books from the earliest club days, detail searches for the most basic of yacht club needs - a patch of water frontage to launch boats and a location where sailing trophies could be presented and displayed.

Today, the clubhouse is a vital part of the village's tourism infrastructure. It is a community meeting place. It has played host to birthday parties, kids Halloween dress-up contests, wedding celebrations, regatta festivities and provides a homey gathering place for sailors and friends.

The Bras d'Or Yacht Club's past is interwoven with the history of the village itself.

Beginnings: 1904

Baddeck at the beginning of the 20th century was at a crossroads. The lake was the birthing point for over 40 vessels in the early days of the village, but now, that industry was gone. Baddeck was becoming a destination for tourists and wealthy Americans who build summer homes on the shores of the Bras d'Or Lake. The focus for ships on the lake was moving from industry to recreational.

On July 26, 1904, summer resident Charles Carruth called a meeting of local and summer residents "to consider the advisability of organizing a yacht club." Of the 12 charter members listed, eight were yacht owners.

Local businessman Arthur McCurdy was chosen as secretary. The enthusiasm of the group is evident at that first meeting as they attempt to tackle the formidable task of drafting a constitution.

"During the discussion, Mr. A.W. McCurdy found the lateness of the hour necessitated his withdrawing from the meeting and H. Percy Blanchard was appointed to take his place as secretary."

The constitution was not recorded for another decade, but races were planned within days. By the first week of August 1904, the newly formed Bras d'Or Yacht Club had organized a boat parade and designed a club burgee - "a blue field with a yellow chevron made according to a plan drawn by Charles Carruth".

But before any official races could be conducted, there was much work to be done. A race course had to be planned, measured and marked. Since there were no trophies yet, cash prizes of \$3, \$4, \$5 and \$6 were awarded. In addition to a special class and a first class race, there was also a single skull rowing race open for ladies, which consisted of an eighth mile straight course between two buoys. The yacht race course started "a point at or near the lighthouse through east to a buoy opposite Carruth's (present day Breezy Brae/Woodford's); then southwest to a buoy one and a quarter miles south east of Spectacle Island. Then around Spectacle Island through the harbour crossing starting line starboard." The course for motor boats, a relatively new phenomenon, began at Carruth's buoy to a boat anchored off Kidston's Island north of the lighthouse and back three times.

In July 1905, Charles Carruth offers a sterling silver cup, “to be known as the Commodore's Cup...to be competed for, between members of this club”. At that same July meeting, Henry Corson, the American industrialist who built a summer home in Ingonish (where the Keltic Lodge is today), donated \$100 towards the purchase of a cup to “advance the sport of the club”. P.L. McFarlane passes the hat and another \$10.50 is raised by local businessmen to be used toward a trophy.

Members were actively searching for some water frontage. “Mr. Blanchard offers the use of his waterfront east of Mr. Hoppin's (Charlotte Fraser's) for a couple of years...rent free if members of the club wish to use same as a place for a float or landing,” the club minutes record in April 1906.

Over the course of the next five years, money is raised for a clubhouse in a variety of interesting ventures: proceeds from lectures by Alexander Graham Bell and Russian explorer George Kennan; proceeds from a dance and money raised from a guessing game.

The annual meeting of 1913 was a joyous celebration as the members convene in their new waterfront clubhouse. While excitement was high for the move, members were busy planning the club's first official regatta. A year later, while members smoked cigars and relaxed over another successful sailing season, the men listened to the old timers recall the days of old.

“Some very interesting yarns were spun by Mr. George Kennan and Honourable Charles Carruth, whilst D.M. McDonald 'Donald from Bras d'Or' reminded us of the good old days when rum was passed around in tin buckets and served out in ramekins at the launching of the good old ship Bradalbane built on this present site of this clubhouse.”

The Bradalbane, a 224-ton barque, was the largest ship built in Baddeck. The elaborate and stately vessel was built by businessman and politician Charles Campbell. In 1857 it was one of six ships to take Rev. Norman McLeod's followers from St. Ann's and Baddeck to New Zealand.

With a concentrated fund raising effort, the clubhouse debt is completely paid off in 1915. To celebrate, a ladies night is inaugurated.

Through the years, numerous gatherings have taken place on boats, in harbours, on beaches around the Bras d'Or. In 1915, Alexander Graham Bell wonderfully describes a clambake (although he notes there were “no clams, oysters being substituted”) on Beinn Bhreagh Harbour.

“There was quite a large gathering on the shore of the waterfall harbour, off Beinn Bhreagh Harbour. Bonfires, baked oysters, sandwiches bread & butter, ginger ale and tea. The Scrapper and the Alexander were anchored near by decorated with lanterns also numerous boats and motor boats on shore. The supper table had been made of boards and a temporary wharf on the shore. Supper was followed by Gaelic songs.”

Bell composed a song for the occasion, “dedicated to the Bras d'Or Yacht Club by Beinn Bhreagh Friends” to honour of the club. It is filled with references to his friend Casey Baldwin (and then commodore of the BYC); to Baldwin's boat 'Scrapper II' and a hard won race for the Coronation Cup in Sydney Harbour. The inventor aptly describes the wondrous day on the water: “The breeze was strong, the course was long, and spray was in the air.” (See page 6 for complete song).

Almost 50 years later, JAD McCurdy, then Lt. Governor of Nova Scotia, addressed the club. McCurdy, who had been an active member of the Bras d'Or Yacht Club since its inception, carried happy memories of the club throughout his life and was now planning to host a race and donate a trophy. "The Lt. Governor of Nova Scotia told the club the cup he was donating was now in Baddeck and he would prepare a deed of gift to the club. The cup will be raced for every two years and is for the championship of the Bras d'Or Lake. The cup is to remain with the club."

The Ladies Auxiliary:

For the first 50 years, club minute books make mention of plans for races, names up for membership, repairs to the clubhouse and the price of a pint of beer; a decidedly male take on things. Then, on October 9, 1948 the Ladies Auxiliary is formed. In the first year alone the Ladies Auxiliary immediately set to work seeking donations for cups and saucers, making curtains, fund raising for the tennis court, billeting visiting sailors and setting up a canteen. They endeavor to sell pins, sweaters, hot dogs, tickets on a homemade afghan (with proceeds going toward the purchase of a 'Victrola') and they bought dishtowels, curtain rods, records and were on the hunt for a piano.

It became clear that the men's way of conducting themselves at the club and the women's way was different. In January 9, 1950, it was moved and seconded that "the secretary [of the Ladies Auxiliary] write to the men of the club and ask them to keep the club cleaner."

Two years later, another resolution on the books and a letter of protest is ordered sent to the men "asking them to keep the kitchen and club rooms cleaner and in better order."

By 1953, the ladies Auxiliary report the clubhouse has been entirely redecorated with new shelving in the kitchen. "The members are very pleased with the appearance."

Members:

The summer of 1907 was a heady time in Baddeck. A group of young, energetic men had gathered at Beinn Bhreagh and were setting the course for the future of aviation. The details of the Aerial Experiment Association (A.E.A.) would not be finalized until October, but Douglas McCurdy, Frederick 'Casey' Baldwin, Lt. Thomas Selfridge, with Glenn Curtiss and Alexander and Mabel Bell, were designing an organization that would build and fly Canada's first aeroplanes.

The minutes for the July 7th annual meeting make mention of three aviation pioneers that were members of the BYC – Douglas McCurdy, Casey Baldwin and Lt. Thomas Selfridge. McCurdy had organized to have a pennant-draped flagpole built at the eastern end of Kidston Island. Baldwin, an engineer, is mentioned for the first time when he is elected 'official measurer'; while Lt. Thomas Selfridge seconds the motion for Charles Carruth to become commodore. By then end of 1907, Selfridge would be delighting Baddeck residents as he floated above the Bras d'Or in the AEA's giant tetrahedral kite the 'Cygnet'. Sadly, in September 1908, Selfridge became the world's first aviation fatality when he died while testing a plane with Orville Wright in the United States.

Some of the spirit of innovation that invigorated the AEA seems evident in this meeting. When Alexander Graham Bell is called on by commodore Charles Carruth to speak to the men about sailboats, he advocates: "First, safety; second, comfort, third, speed."

Percy Blanchard, secretary that evening, adds, almost as a footnote: "It is understood that a boat with its propeller in the air is eligible for the motor boat race."

By the 1950's the minute books make frequent mention of men who submitted their name for approval to become a club member. One tongue-in-cheek request from October 1964 lists a 'Duncan Hines' among the hopefully applicants. While other names are voted on and approved, Mr. Hines name is tabled, pending more information. A month later the secretary is instructed to investigate the request as no member "could present sufficient information to vote on this application".

While there are women listed in the membership (Mabel Bell, Kathleen Baldwin, Augusta & Caroline McCurdy) as early as 1914, it is an entirely honorary role. In March 1966, as the world is rethinking women's roles in society, the board votes to accept its first female member. The trailblazer was Angie McCharles, a junior sailing instructor and competitive sailor. On a motion by Daniel MacAulay (seconded by Duncan Beaton) the club voted to amend the bylaws to permit "females, 21 years or older to become associate members".

This tentative step was made with some provisions: "It was understood that an associate member has no voting privileges but can hold some offices by appointment."

Sport and Recreation:

In the 1930's members begin to see the club's role encompass other sport and recreation activities. A tennis court is constructed beside the yacht club; a quoits (a game similar to horseshoes, only with metal rings) tournament is hosted, swimming races are instituted and badminton is played. In the 1970's a winter sport committee is struck to examine how to encourage summer sailors to be winter athletes and a snowmobile club is formed. Twenty years later, some of the last snowmobile races are held on the frozen Bras d'Or. As the club approached its centennial in 2004, a frozen lake top was becoming more and more rare. The lack of ice, however, makes it easier (psychologically at least) for the swimmers who continue to take part in the Club's annual New Year's Day Polar Bear Dip, racing into the freezing waters of the Bras d'Or to ring in each new year.

Entertainment:

"Any damn fool can navigate the world sober. It takes a really good sailor to do it drunk."
~ Sir Francis Chichester~

In August 1905, the commodore notes that during a race, "the Osprey crew were drinking and passed a bottle of whiskey to one of the schooners". Much debate followed as to whether to sanction the Osprey crew and it was decided to ask the crew to bow out of the race. After further debate, the motion was withdrawn. Instead, the club's board of governors planned to meet with the crew to "tell them we disapprove". Motion carried.

In the early days, the club afforded men the place to smoke cigars unencumbered. In October 1918, a month before the end of World War I, the board of governors suggest that the BYC host "one or two 'smokers' for the members of the HMCS ships in port, provided that any cases of Spanish Influenza develop that the governing board shall cancel the same."

The Community at Large

It is not to be forgotten that club members were (and still are) also members of other organizations in town. Bras d'Or Yacht Club sailors are also Masons, Lions, and volunteer firemen. A May 1960 club meeting was "interrupted by fire department call and the secretary did not return to the meeting".

The minutes are thin between 1916 and 1918. The Red Cross uses the clubhouse for a fund raiser and the 1916 annual meeting makes mention of the number of outstanding dues. In July 1917, a sombre note: "Secretary was requested to draft a resolution of condolence to E.G. McAskill." McAskill, owner of the McKay-McAskill store had just lost his son William in World War I. William was an avid sailor and an active club member before he enlisted. He was shot down over France in June 1917 and died shortly after.

A year later, incoming commodore George Hollifield states in a speech that he looks forward the time "when the restrictions on racing and boating made necessary by the war would soon be removed and that yachting would be resumed with renewed interest which have been impossible for the last three seasons."

From early on, the club played a role in upgrading the waterfront and promoting the town. While there were as many as three wharves lining the waterfront, all were privately owned. As early as April 1906, less than a year after organizing, the club was writing to area M.P. A.C. Ross "to do all that he can to further the immediate building of a public wharf."

In 1935, Casey Baldwin makes a pitch, appealing to "the people of our town to support the club which was our chief summer attraction for tourists". In July 1969 letter, the club asks the Baddeck Village Commission and to the Board of Health to do something about Baddeck's inadequate sewer system. "Boats are leaving the harbour due to the smell created by the sewage."

Traditions:

- ◆ George Hollifield sailed to the Arctic with Robert Peary in 1896 in Peary's first attempt to discover the North Pole. Hollifield, the first secretary of the club, recorded the minutes of each meeting, opening with "The Bras d'Or Yacht Club met at 8 bells of the second dog watch." The nautical language refers to the naval tradition of ringing bells to mark the beginning and end of watches and to inform the crew of the time.
- ◆ A cannon was used to start races in the early 20th century.
- ◆ Since the formation of the Yacht Club, there have been annual races in July and August. But it isn't until 1935 that the annual regatta is officially held. And it is not until 1952 that the dates for the regatta – the first week in August, are set. Until then, the regatta was held on a variety of dates, often moved to accommodate other club's races.

Conclusion:

Through the first century of its existence, the Bras d'Or Yacht Club's history is woven into the tapestry of the village of Baddeck and the Bras d'Or lake. Its Junior Sailing program continues to inspire youth and advance the sport of sailing; the annual regatta is a celebration of the science and art of sailing and the clubhouse continues to be a welcome beacon for residents and visitors alike.

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*History compiled and written by Jocelyn Bethune March 2010.*

**Song composed by  
Alexander Graham Bell, Mabel Bell, Melville Grosvenor and Miss Fletcher  
September 1913**

Once upon a summer day  
The Scrapper II went forth.  
It sailed away  
To Sydney Bay  
For prizes in the North.

Chorus: Oh! - The yacht club of Bras d'Or  
Success for ever more!  
The Scrapper II and Baldwin too!  
The Yacht Club of Bras d'Or!

The Halifax boat and the Louisbourg boat  
And the Sydney boats were there.  
The breeze was strong  
The course was long  
And spray was in the air.

Oh! - The yacht club of Bras d'Or  
Success for ever more!  
The Scrapper II and Baldwin too!  
The Yacht Club of Bras d'Or!

The Halifax boat was in the lead  
And slight no chance for the Scrapper II  
But the commodore  
He took the floor ( he swore a swore)  
With the bold MacDonald crew.

Oh! - The yacht club of Bras d'Or  
Success for ever more!  
The Scrapper II and Baldwin too!  
The Yacht Club of Bras d'Or!

And they beat that Halifax boat  
As though she was a wreck (Though it was almost near a wreck)  
And returned from sea  
With the C. U. P.  
To the glory of old Baddeck

Oh! - The yacht club of Bras d'Or  
Success for ever more!  
The Scrapper II and Baldwin too!  
The Yacht Club of Bras d'Or!