

THE OTTAWA-NEW EDINBURGH CANOE CLUB

by

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FIFTY-EIGHT summers ago, seven “Young Gentlemen”, as the newspapers of the time had it, or, as we would say in our cruder age, seven paddling fiends formed an “Association to Exercise and Promote the Noble Art of Paddling”. Living, eating and sleeping in their canoes, amidst the floating islands of sawdust on the Ottawa River and seemingly enjoying it, these new apostles called upon the population of the Capital and the rest of the world to share their thrills, misery and happiness. Ownership of a canoe or a keen desire to own one was the only requirement to join the Association. Thus came into being the Ottawa Canoe Club, the first aquatic organization of the Capital, on a rare day in June of the year of our Lord 1883. The club made few recruits although no admission fee was charged.

Two years later, in 1885, realizing that tangible and visible assets might help them by creating an impression of wealth, stability and permanency, the same men raised \$200 and built a floating boat house to shelter their craft and the rapidly increasing number of their trophies. This imposing structure was moored at the foot of the locks “near the end of St. Patrick Street”, where it remained moored for eight years, until 1894 when it started to move down stream, following the club in its migrations. The membership fee was boosted from nothing to \$1. This was rather high, but then, one had something to show for it.

In 1893, the need of a better paddling course and a better swimming ‘ole, and the desire to get away from the baneful sawdust which was cast upon the waters with great prodigality by the Chaudiere mills, quite ignorant then of the value of this by-product, led the Club to seek a more favourable location down stream. A secluded spot was found in a little bay, some two miles down from the locks, opposite the “picturesque village of Pointe Gatineau”, not a bad neighborhood, and just below the mouth of the swift Gatineau River. The sum of \$3,500 was raised and a good, substantial home was built, anchored and bolted to the side of a steep cliff. It was a good looking, two storey structure, a bit narrow but fairly long, with racks for 85 canoes, a ballroom and a verandah. To us of the present and supposedly effeminate, indolent, machine spoiled generation, the most striking feature about the ‘94 structure was a seven horsepower electric canoe hoist, the first of the kind operated in America, we are told, a marvelous contrivance which actually lowered the canoes in the water and lifted them out of it. There is no electric hoist in our present \$50,000 structure; canoes are still being pulled up and let down by elbow grease, although the distance between the canoe floor and the water is at least ten feet more than it was in the building of ‘94. The membership fee in the new building was set at \$3, quite a high rate for the time. No charge was made for ladies; they were welcome, fees or no fees. Mention is found however, in the minutes of those days, of, a girl who used to take her brother’s canoe out and paddle it alone, and some members of the Executive were of the opinion that she should be charged a fee, but

apparently no action was taken. Girls did not pay their way until the beginning of the first world war.

The Ottawa Canoe Club was to remain thirty happy years in these quarters below the cliff, from 1894 to 1923. It was not a bad spot, the swimming 'ole was very fair, being quite deep, there was an eddy there that took the swimmers up with little exertion as far as Seguin's boat house, while the current mid-stream brought them down; no work either way; the opportunities for pleasure canoeing were of the best, but the paddling course was "punk", according to the paddlers, "as crooked as a dog's legs", while that eddy at the end invariably carried to victory the crew lucky enough to draw No. 1 course. But who does not know that paddlers are never satisfied? Give them the Atlantic ocean for a course and they will want the Pacific as well. The Club grew and prospered despite these slight handicaps until it encountered strong competition from two rival organizations, both launched about 1904, the Rideau Aquatics and the New Edinburghs. After that, the membership remained about stationary. There was plenty water for everybody but hardly enough canoemen to keep three clubs paddling in wealth. It does not appear however from the financial statements of those days that the Executive had great financial worries. A revenue of \$ 1,200 a year was more than sufficient to cover the expenditure. The total premiums on insurance only amounted to \$24.57, less than one-twentieth of the premiums on the, present building. The total salaries for the year did not exceed \$350. The Secretary wrote complainingly of "heavy liability" whenever some reckless expenditure on paddling, or some rainy day on the occasion of a regatta left a deficit of \$100 or so, but the liability was generally paid off the next year. Happy days these were for the Executive!

Two meets or "regattas" were held every year, one for the swimmers and one for the paddlers, and what was lost on one was generally made up on the other. Sometimes both made money, and then there was high glee and renewed talks about enlarging and remodelling the clubhouse "to attract more members". The most important thing however was the fact that hundreds of young people had an opportunity for building up their health or strength. Paddlers and swimmers made a name for themselves over every water course in Eastern Canada and licked every visiting club on their own course, and the shelves of the club house, groaning under the weight of the trophies, had to be reinforced from time to time. Practically all members were active. Aquatics were the main diversion in those days and young Ottawa spent its leisure time on or in the water. There was, little automobiling, no senseless driving and squandering of gasoline, but intelligent canoeing and motor-boating instead. Scores of pleasure canoes went out every Sunday morning and explored every nook and cranny of the Ottawa and Gatineau rivers, some going to Chelsea Falls, others drifting down to the sandy shores of Duck Island or the grassy banks of Besserer's Grove (now Hiawatha).. Long distance canoe trips were then looked upon as the ideal way of spending a vacation. One would have scoffed at the idea of logging a canoe over a motor car when a course was available to take you there and the paddling was good. The writer, with various canoe mates, discovered and charted the twenty mile course over the Ottawa and Blanche river, the eighty mile course over the Ottawa, Lievre and Blanche, including Dodge, Green, Grand and McGregor Lakes; the great Maniwaki trip with that marvelous string of twelve lakes including Thirty-one mile

lake and the great Whitefish lake; the Eagle trip over the Desert and thrilling Eagle River, the Desert, Round, Coaqoma and Pythonga lakes, while Eric Roy and George Audette explored the beautiful Silver lake county and the sources of the Lievre. Races were held over the 20 and 80 miles course, and competitors came from all parts of Canada. They were won two years in succession by Roy and Audette, and one year by Roy and R. Joliette.

When, after slowly creeping up to a high mark of two hundred and thirty, the membership became stationary or started to decline, the Club again became restless. A comparatively new sport, tennis, was enticing members away from paddling organizations. Why stay here, hanging on to this bare cliff with no possibility of expansion, when land suitable for tennis could be obtained further down the river? "Just around the bend" half a mile down, was a marvelous paddling course, the best in Canada, a straight stretch, three miles long, where Champlain on his way up the "Rivière des Outaouais, in search of a short cut to China and stopping for the day, was said to have held the first canoe race in Canada. And around this course was land for scores of tennis courts. Two factions developed, one wanting to stay and remodel the old building, the other insisting on moving down stream. The latter won when the Ottawa Improvement Commission offered to lease the land, and Architect Meredith drew plans for a palatial Club building on the new site. Amalgamation with other clubs was sought. One peep at the plans was enough to convince the New Edinburghs whose boat house was starting to leak, and they came back to the fold but they insisted on keeping their name, illustrated by many victories, and the Ottawa Canoe Club became the "Ottawa New Edinburgh Canoe Club". Its representatives are popularly known as the "Burghs" from Ottawa. whereas they should be called the Ottawas and Burghs.

The time for \$200 or \$3500 building was past. The \$10,000 that were raised in 1914 by a Committee headed by the late F. D. Burpee did not even cover the cost of the steel frame of the new building, set on piles, sunk 30 feet deep in the bed of the river. Then came World War No 1 and the post war depression and the Club marked time for eight long years until 1923, while a gaunt steel structure that was to be the frame of the finest club house in Canada rusted away down the river. It might still be rusting if fire had not destroyed the old quarters and galvanized the paddlers into action.

Fifteen thousand dollars were needed to finish the new building and when the building was finished and completed to the last nail, and there was absolutely nothing more to do but enjoy it, that twenty thousand dollars more were required for a new bridge, for tennis courts and a thousand and one things including a \$10,000 concrete wall around the base of the steel frame, which swayed dangerously on dance nights. Some of the money was found, a good deal of it was borrowed, but no one worried. With the membership fee at \$25 including a \$10 initiation fee and 200 new members joining yearly, with the proceeds of the May Fairs launched by Eric Roy and continued by Eddie Hebert and Cecil Powers. the revenue of the Club was so large that the only trouble seemed to be was to find ways to spend it. Then came the knock out blow, the black depression of 1929, the Civil Service cut and a fifty percent decrease in fees and revenue, the cessation of the street car service, compelling the Club to provide its own means of transportation at great cost. The

club survived but it has been a long hard and painful row since 1930.

That famous paddling course, the hope of the Canadian Canoe Association, the goal of the club for forty years, and the main “raison d’être” for its successive migrations down stream, was tried for a Canadian Championship meet in 1914 and again in 1923, and on both occasions it was a flat failure because some one blundered. It should have been laid mid stream, but those who were entrusted with the task were afraid of “cross currents, eddies and whirlpools” that never existed except in their wild imagination, and they laid it close to the shore, where the paddlers of 1914 struck shallow water while those of 1923 got an unfair protection from the wind. Six Northern Division Meets have since been held over this course, properly laid, and the results were entirely satisfactory to all concerned. In the Ottawa River in August the current, always moderate, is quite uniform from the shore of Kettle Island to the Ontario shore, and there is not a single cross current or whirlpool.

I had the honour and privilege of being Captain of the Ottawa New Edinburgh Canoe Club from 1916 to 1922, President of the Club house Company Ltd to which was entrusted the task of building the new Club house from 1922 to 1925, and Commodore of the Club since 1925, and I am glad of this opportunity to pay a tribute to the men with whom I have been associated and who by their energy, resourcefulness and incessant labour, have helped me to carry to a successful conclusion this great task, without any thought of personal gain or remuneration, in fact paying their fees like other members while giving their whole spare time to the Club. I desire to mention particularly F. C. Baillie, Secretary in 1923 and 1924, Eric Roy, the present Commodore of the C.C.A., Colonel S. H. Hill, past Commodore of the Club, Newell Seaner, J. Rattray Wilson, “Dave” Gill, W. T. Crowe, los Bellamy, Colonel R. M. Courtney, Wm Garvock, C. McCreery, Earl Paget and A. A. Pinard. Let them find here the wholehearted thanks of thousands of people, young or old, who have found in the Ottawa New Edinburgh Canoe Club that which is perhaps the most necessary requisite for happiness — the means for virile and healthy recreation.

* This article was published in 1941 on the occasion of the Canadian Canoe Club Dominion Championship Regatta at ONECC. The author, Charles Edmond Mortureux was a dominating presence in the Ottawa New Edinburgh Club and in Ottawa sports from the end of the First World War until the end of the Second. He was Captain of the Ottawa New Edinburgh Canoe Club from 1916 to 1922, President of the Club House Company Ltd which organized the building of the new Club house from 1922 to 1925, and Commodore of the Club from 1925 until the 1940s.

In addition, from 1919 until 1946 he was President of the Ottawa Ski club. In 1982 he was inducted into the Canadian Ski Hall of Fame.