

# The History of The Pontiac Yacht Club

## Written by Charles W. Buck

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11/17/04

Dear Dick,

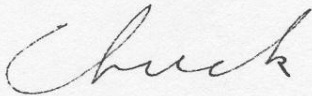
First, thanks for checking with Ruth Lyons to see if she had received my comments on the establishment of PYC and what I remember of Ray Ransom. Up until you checked I did not know whether or not she had received it, let alone whether or not she was going to use any or all of it. Incidentally, I still haven't heard from her.

Second - I added two sections to what I did previously. One concerns the engineering and construction of the present dock, the other about the Club Boats. They're both going to need extensive repair and/or replacement soon and my few comments might be useful.

Third - I have included two new revised copies of the entire writeup. Throw away what you now have and use this revision. If PYC now has some permanent central files put one copy in it - but save the other for yourself. They may come in handy some time in the future.

Have a grand Holiday Season and -- thanks a million for your help.

Cordially



## First My Disclaimer

Please recognize that the time period involved covered my High School and College years as well as my life afterward as a member of Pontiac Yacht Club (20) years. This included my time on the Club's board, as well as Commodore. The overall time involved: 1937 to 1964.

Most of the early period that I mention was told to me casually at later dates by members who were involved at the time, so I am relying on my memory of their memories of the start of PYC. And, as I am now into my early eighties, my memory is not as sharp as it once was. Any comments I make about when something happened must be regarded as approximate only.

## PYC Beginnings

The Club grew from a nucleus of members of the Oakland County Boat Club (both sail and power) located on Sylvan Lake. The men in the group included Shirley Bomhart (whom I never met) Roy Connolly, Henry St. John, Charlie Callahan, and possibly Buell Star, Harold Cousins, Ray Ransom and George Wasserberger. I believe the other early Commodores, Van Phipps, Al Gray, and Les Huntwork came later. Art Redner did not join the Club until some time after I joined (1944). Their reasons for leaving OCBC were that emphasis was placed primarily on power boats, with "sail" being regarded as a hanger-on activity, and treated as such. The sailboat sailors also objected strenuously [sic] to what they regarded as excess drinking in the clubhouse, as it eliminated family activities. This was told to me again and again by all of these beginning members, and they were not teatollars [sic] when away from PYC.

### Side Bar:

The primary owner of Ward's Point was Caleb Somers. His home was the large frame mansion located between Orchard and Cass lakes and facing Cass. It is just above your number 3 buoy. Joe Ward owned an acre or so of property, with cabin, in the middle of the Point. It was off the end of what is now the end of Erie Drive.

### End Side Bar

Why did they select the location they did for this new club? Mr. Somers recognized that the Point was valuable residential property and wanted a buffer between the land he planned to subdivide and the Keego Harbor trailer park. PYC fitted the idea to a tee. The bay was a natural harbor, protecting it from all winds except from those coming from the north to northeast. The bathing beach was solid sand. A club house could be constructed on high ground well above the lake level and the land between the club house location and the road was clear of brush and trees. The price was right, the property was ideal, the "deal" was closed. The Club now owned the land.

### Side Bar

I now live outside Gladwin Michigan. I had not been home to Pontiac in nine years, so last weekend I came back for an overnighter. I caught the Club in a work bee, removing the hoists from the individual slips. A couple of the members asked me when work on the clubhouse was

begun. I really don't remember. The main clubroom and basic ladies and mens restrooms were completed before I joined the Club in the Spring of 1944.

End Side Bar

## **Ray Ransom**

I understand that Ray got his degree in Civil Engineering and was a registered surveyor. I think it very possible that he was in home construction before the depression. But, from the time I first met him in the late thirties, he was the chief assessor for the City of Pontiac. He, obviously with that job, was a man of considerable influence in the greater Pontiac area.

His wife was one of the sweetest, most considerate women I have ever met. Unfortunately she died of cancer around 1946 or 1947. Ray never remarried.

The Ransom's had one child, a daughter Drucilla. Dru was an attractive woman, equally as nice as her mother. She married Don Neal of our Club a year or two after her mother died. She also died of cancer a few years later. Don and Dru had no children.

When I first met him Ray was sailing a 19 or 20 foot cat boat. He did not race but enjoyed sailing immensely. With his cat boat rig he could sail alone in air that would require two people to handle a Lightning or another sloop of about the same size. My memory on the next point is hazy, but I believe he sold the boat about the time Don and Dru were married. He would then either sail their boat under main only sail with them, or go out in the Club Boat.

## **The East Fence Line**

When the Club began there weren't many boats and those the members had were mixed: Snipes, Comet, Phantom, Ray's Leutke cat boat, a Crescent, two 17 foot lap strake sloops. Because of their differing sizes a handicap system was devised and the current Fleet Captain sweated over scoring each time a race was held. This all but came to a close when the members purchased Lightnings 835 through 842 from Skaneateles Boats who were going into War work.

With the purchase of the Lightnings the Club found itself involved with an organization that sponsored and promoted regattas. This meant that the boats were hauled in and out of the water more. The boat trailers started to break through the sand bottom and bog down. Hauling in and out became a miserable experience, and once out space was needed to step or unstep the masts; and there was no space. What to do?

We knew that the legal lot line at the water was 25 to 45 feet further East from the then existing fence. Ray surveyed the line and proved our claim to be true. Ray filled out the necessary papers. Then Clarence Patterson Chairman of the then most prominent legal firm in the County, a member of the Yacht Club and a resident of Dow Ridge, did the legal work. Once it was done and negotiations with the owners of the Trailer Park were completed, the Circuit Court approved the moving of the fence to the place it now occupies.

The next year (1951) Don Neal did the engineering for a launching ramp and supervised its installation. It was made of Redwood because we wanted it easily removable in case his suppositions were incorrect and the ramp could not be used as we wanted it to be. Like everything done to the Club at this point, the work itself was done by the members.

A few years later, with the successful proving of the launching ramp, the Redwood was torn out and the present launching ramp installed. It was also constructed by the members.

## **The Lake Level**

The Clinton River flows into Cass Lake at the head of Gerundicut Bay, and out at the North end of Keego Harbor. The Circuit Court had established an official lake level years before my time. However the only control was a quantity of sand bags placed across the egress of the River from the Lake. If the lake level was to be lowered sand bags were removed from the dam. If it was to be raised sand bags were added to the dam. There was no control by any government body. If you wanted the level lowered you and your buddies removed sand bags. If you wanted the level increased you added sand bags.

What brought the dam to our attention was the fact that we began dragging our centerboards on the bottom in areas where this had never happened. A little detective work disclosed that sand bags were being removed by new home owners who did not want to have trouble with their septic tanks.

Once again we went to Clarence Patterson for legal help and to Ray Ransom to check whether or not the lake level was that set by the court. It was not. It was significantly lower. Once again Clarence and Ray worked at no charge to the Club.

The Court at that time established a drainage district that encompassed the entire lake. All property owners voted on the question. It passed and the present dam built. Costs were paid by drainage district funds assessed to all drainage district residents. If you drag your board now it has to be your fault, not a disgruntled property owner.

## **Commodore Ransom**

Ray was Commodore in 1942 - two years before I joined the Club - so I have no recollection of what happened during his year. However, having been a Commodore myself and watching other Commodores work during their year, I am certain he had experiences similar to those the rest of us had.

And, like the rest of us he had both pride in what he had done as well as some regrets over some things that went wrong. In addition, like all Past Commodores, he was glad when his year was over. Being Commodore is not an easy job.

## **The Ray Ransom Trophy**

I swear the first time I ever saw the trophy was last week (10/9/04). I recognized Ruth Plew's ceramic work for I have some hanging in my study. I must be wrong about the trophy for I knew well: Charlie and Phyllis Callahan, Paul and Mary Goode, Ken Wood, Dick Beaubien and Ken Bonnett. Each certainly deserved recognition. I know Ray would approve each person who's name has been engraved on the trophy, or who in the future will receive the honor. It is so typical of the man.

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Note: The previous paragraphs were written to give the reader an overview of the early history of Pontiac Yacht Club., and the type of members it attracts.

In writing it I became aware that at some time in the future the Club would find it necessary to replace the current club boat and also find it faced with replacing portions or all of the dock. Hence, I wrote the following to cover the history of each and to give some data on the underwater steel of the dock.

Charles W. Buck  
11/15/04

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## **Dock Construction**

The original dock was much smaller than the current one and was supported by fence posts dug into the lake bottom. The dock was a permanent one and was left in the water year round. However, if the ice went out during a "blue norther" or nor-easter the ice would destroy the dock. It would then have to be rebuilt.

Al Gray (Jerry's father) did the engineering he and his committee supervised its construction. (The heavy work was done by the rest of us). This construction was done during the Winter of 1946 or 1947.

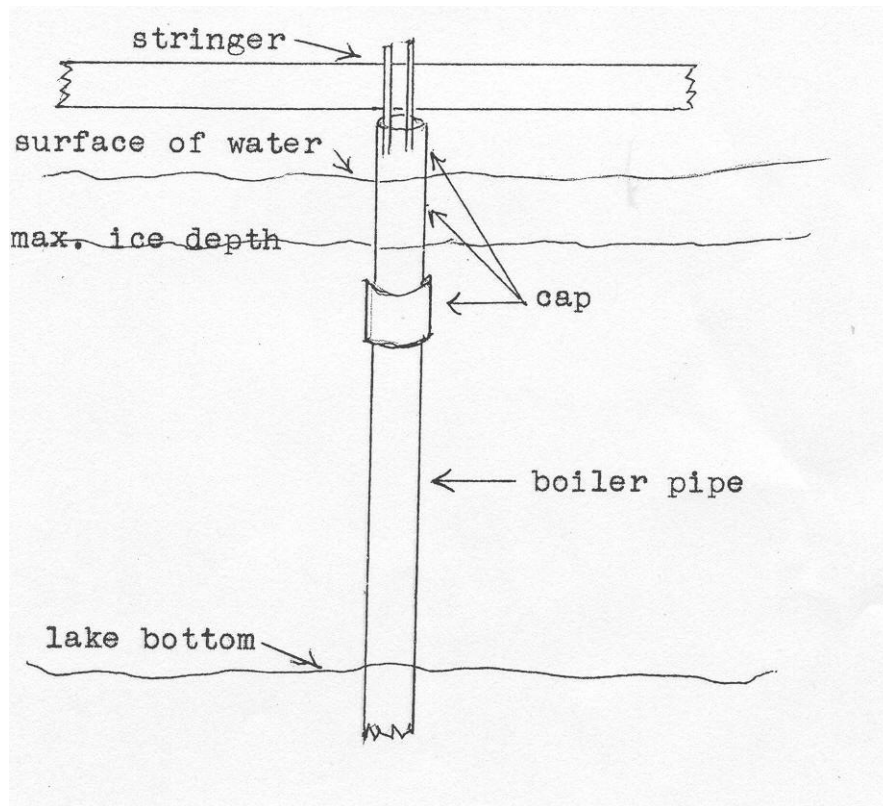
Al spent a great deal of time attempting to design a dock that could take the tugging of forty eight boats (all our waterfront could handle) and be completely removable in the Winter.

### Side Bar

The boats were kept in the water until several years after I left the Club (1964). On a recent trip to Pontiac how we kept the boat bottoms clean. About once a month we would careen the boat in shallow water and sand the bottom with wet-or-dry sandpaper.

### End Side Bar

He came up with the idea of using steel pipe that would be driven into the lake bottom and stick up into the water far enough (but still below the ice level) to accept the caps that would be inserted in the Spring and removed in the Fall, and would support the pipe stringers that would take the weight of the dock.



Tests proved that if ten to twelve feet of pipe were driven through the sand and into the marl clay of the bottom, skin suction between the pipe and clay would make the pipe immovable. Van Phipps found a source of used boiler pipe that was suitable for our use and we were underway.

A local Keego Harbor welder made our caps. They were all identical except for those next to the shore.

When the ice was thick enough the members divided into several two and four man teams. The two man teams drilled holes in the ice where the twenty foot verticals were to be driven. Then the four man teams would take a twenty foot length of pipe put a cap on it, move it to the edge of a hole, raise it to vertical and pound it through the layer of sand. Once through the sand and into the clay the pipe was easily pushed into the marl clay until the top of the cap was the proper height above the ice.

Pushing the pipe into the clay was a continuous process, for if you stopped, the pipe immediately became immovable.

Al's engineering was excellent, for today the Club is still using the same steel that we members installed in the late forties.

## The Club Boats

The original Club Boat was a non-descript, open, outboard. The only good things you could truthfully say about it was that the engine was dependable and if the weather was too bad for the boat, it was too bad for the (pre Lightning) sailboats.

But, with the advent of the Lightnings it became apparent that a larger Club Boat was required. The first one we purchased was Caleb Sommers pontoon boat. Its pontoons were 55 gallon drums welded together and its engine was a Willys 4 cylinder, water cooled from the lake. Seats were along the sides like present day pontoon boats and the craft was steered by a rudder.

This boat was stable enough and powerful enough for Cass Lake when it was really "dusty." But it was WET; a very uncomfortable ride in rough weather. So, a year or two after the construction of the dock the Club Boat Committee went to the Detroit Boat Show and came back with the boat you have today. It came without engine so Al Gray bought a Grey 4 cylinder marine engine and installed it. We then made the slip for it that is used today.