

# MENTOR HARBOR YACHTING CLUB



## History

Mentor Harbor Yachting Club – as it stands today – is the result of extensive planning going back to far-seeing members who, in July 1928, organized the original club. Through a series of events, the club has survived the events of 1929, has weathered the lean war years, and has reinvested in its infrastructure to become what we know today.

The membership owes a deep debt of gratitude to a succession of dedicated officers and directors who, over the years had the vision and follow-through to bring these dreams to fruition. Here's how it came about from the start way back when. Harbor Yachting Club, originally incorporated in 1928, barely survived its initial eight years during the depression. Once through this period, the club regrouped, and has continued to grow throughout the years.

### **The Marsh**

On a bright August afternoon, when the rows of handsome cruisers lie easily at their docks and only the smallest boats in the lagoons try to point out each change of the wind, it is natural to find yourself believing that Mentor Harbor has always been as it is now, but this is a quiet trick which an agreeable scene plays on you.

Even in winter, if you love boats, your eye finds little that calls up the past. The ship's hulls, shrouded under winter covers, seem to belong to the present and to the future. Their underwater lines, exposed now, have a beauty that speaks of next spring, next summer.

What you cannot readily see, as you look at the pleasant harbor, at its well-kept fleet, and at the clubhouse that stands beside it, is that you are enjoying the fortunate result of a long and tangled chain of events. Some of these events were natural. Some were brought

about only by painstaking work of many people. Some were carefully planned and forecast; some were simply chance.

It is not easy to trace the chain of events back to its beginning with certainty, for the early links were forged a long time ago.

For hundreds of years, the land was a marsh which formed a hazy break in the otherwise clearly-etched shoreline of Lake Erie. When the American Indian civilization began to develop, the marsh became a favorite summer camping ground, teeming with game, fish, and wild fowl. The highlands east and west of the marsh were dotted with tents; not many years ago you could see the charred rocks in the fire holes of these Indian encampments.

In the 1800's the marsh was thought a likely spot for bog iron, and a log road, made of closely laid heavy square timbers, was built across it for prospecting. The road became the most traveled route from the Headlands westward to the Herrick farm, which was located on the west bank of the marsh near the present location of the uncompleted highway bridge. The trip involved a deep ford across Garrot Creek in the east arm of the marsh. This creek is bridged today on the first dip in the highway just east of the club.

By the late part of the 19th century, a channel had broken through, and with relatively high lake levels, the marsh's potential as a harbor came to be realized to a small extent. A fleet of small lapstrake-hulled fishing sloops was built up, sailing out of the marsh to tend their nets. The fleet docked in an open arm of water to the east of the marsh and the fishermen dried their nets over the reeds and cattails in the center of the marsh. In the years after 1900, however, the level of the lake dropped somewhat, and the channel became too shallow to be useable, so the operation was abandoned.

Although no longer a harbor, the marsh was still a hunting, trapping, and fishing paradise, with gun club, covered boathouses for skiffs, and a number of small private cabins. Waterfowl came in great flights, to the satisfaction of the hunters in both spring and fall seasons. Large bass and pickerel up to three feet in length were caught in the channel and ponds. The largest carp in Lake Erie – some almost the size of a man – lolled in the warm, sunny backwaters. Water snakes and black snakes up to eleven feet in length were reported in the marsh and the winter trapping of muskrats was a profitable occupation. In all, the marsh was the wildest area on the shore east of Cleveland.

Near the turn of the century, the marsh was recognized as a likely site for a larger harbor. The men who envisioned it then were railroad men; they saw the lakes becoming more

heavily used each year for the transportation of grain down from the Northwest, at shipping rates which the railroads could not legally meet. A protected deep-water harbor, with access to inland railroads, would be of tremendous value – with a railroad-owned fleet of lake vessels to round out the entire shipping process.

The plan (and it was thought out in considerable detail) was developed by the B&O: clear out the marsh, make a harbor of it, and dredge a channel for five miles down the old Grand River to Richmond, with the New York Central constructing the eastern end of the channel. Physically, the plan was feasible, for exploration revealed an average depth of 22 feet of soft muck beneath the marsh surface, which could be dredged out in short order with the use of heavy suction equipment.

So the railroads began buying land. They were brought up short, however, by the results of a series of cases which reached the Supreme Court; the decisions in these Granger Rate Cases were, in effect, that the railroads could carry grain from Minnesota as cheaply as the new steamships. And with the ruling, the prospect of a great new harbor became much less attractive. Having bought a large area of marshland, the B&O railroad decided it had already gone too far, and called the rest of the plan to a halt. The development of the harbor was to wait for a time.

### **The Harbor**

In the 1920's, when boom times seemed destined to grow forever, when the sky was the limit, and immediate possibilities seemed limited only by a man's imagination, Mentor Marsh came once more under the scrutiny of men with vision.

If their dreams failed to work out in every detail, it should not be charged that their plan was a poor one, for it was not. The "hazy break in an otherwise clearly-etched shoreline" was as full of genuine promise in 1926 as it had ever been. Just as with the railroad plan, uncontrollable events took charge of the plans of the group in the 'twenties, and the surprising thing, looking back, is not that their aims were not fully accomplished, but that they came so near realization as they did.

In the middle of that eventful ten-year period, a small group of men was turning casual conversation into a definite plan. The conversation had been about the Venice-like real estate developments which were being successfully promoted in Florida, and about Mentor Marsh. They talked of the good harbor it would make for yachts, and how it might be a wonderful place for a community of fine home for people who liked yachting. The plans

were on a large scale; they involved nothing less than to dredge out the marsh, build a completely concrete-walled harbor, lined with small boat marinas; construct a breakwater and a channel; build a clubhouse, in the Spanish architecture so popular in Florida; start with one fine home; and then advertise the development widely to attract new people and new homes. In 1926 a syndicate was formed to purchase the Marsh and the high land to the North. Only three years later, by the end of 1929, over a million dollars had been spent, and every item in the original plan had become a reality. Only in its hoped-for effect did it fall short. Advertising for the development was run in many places, but it did not attract new people and new homes. In 1930, that was not surprising.

The original syndicate, which did so much in such a short space of time, included S. Livingston Mather, a driving force in the group; James Murphy, Donald McBride, E. Nash Matthews, and Roy S. Dunham. A few months later the syndicate became the Mentor Harbor Company, and new principals were added: Chester A. Bolton, Edward B. Greene, Louise S. Ingalls, H.H. Timken, E.J. Johnson, Samuel Mather, and F.A. Pease.

“The scale of the project” said a club booklet published in 1940, referring to the Company’s overall plans, “did not fit in with events which followed the year 1928.” An incomplete bridge to the island in the lagoons stands in testimony but it and the unused boat wells are virtually the only visible evidence of the plans gone astray.

The Mentor Harbor Yacht Club was originally incorporated on July 9, 1928, and although the harbor has not yet become “an American Venice” as advertising and promotional literature for the development thought it might, the club itself has grown almost continuously since that time. The old Mentor Harbor Company became insolvent by May of 1934, and liens were attached on all its property by the principal contractor. Through the following years, however, S.L. Mather allowed the club members to use the clubhouse without charge.

It was against this background that the club grew. By 1935 there were 200 members and a fleet of 90 boats. In 1936 the organization was re-incorporated as the Mentor Harbor Yachting Club, then boasting 140 boats, power and sail.

In 1944 the harbor was improved by the placement of a barge breakwater at one side of the channel in order to break waves entering the channel and reduce the surge of water inside the harbor. In the following year, a large electric “A” frame crane, with a lifting capacity of 35 tons, was erected north of the clubhouse. This steel structure was a major

part of the boatyard scene until its purpose was superseded by our modern travel lift. The A-frame was removed in 2001.

The Quonset hut was constructed during the winter of 1949-50 by Harold Seymour, a member who was having a 40-foot yawl built at the club.

The severe winter of 1951-52 required harbor improvements for a section of the channel wall which was undermined and broken through by the lake. In 1952 the Board of Directors set up a program of permanent improvements and authorized the issuance of \$100,000 of bonds. With the proceeds it was possible to rebuild the east break wall, install new steel docks, make improvements to the clubhouse and provide a new water supply system, develop a picnic area, add to the skeet facilities, create a children's play yard, and make numerous improvements to the grounds.

The Club's facilities expanded rapidly in the years of 1960 through 1980. Some of these facilities included the swimming pool and locker building (1961), enlargement of the Clubhouse to include a new reception area, enclose the porch which is now "trophy row," building of the cantilevered bar overlooking the lake, channel and breaches, a snack bar at water level, the harbor master's building, and the new T docks (1968); the T docks for the East Beach, a new gate and fence at the front entrance (1971), the assumption of the operation of the boat yard, purchase of a 20-ton travel lift, the tennis courts (1972); a new large mast shed (1973); the purchase of the floating cutter-head dredge with proceeds from loans by members (1975), shelter and showers on the East Beach (1976); and the completion of 16 new docks on the East Beach and fire fighting system on the main docks (1980).

In 1980, both harbor and clubhouse capital improvements were started. These included sea wall repairs to the harbor entrance and inside harbor walls, the upgrading of Crows Nest and Wet Hens sailing fleets and renovation of the Boat Room to the Spinnaker Room, being used for club and private parties and also meetings.

In 1982, to combat the surge problem we had in the harbor, the Board of Directors approved spending \$200,000 to install weir walls (groins) in the channel. A total of 14 weirs were installed which are working well. In addition to the weirs we also reconstructed the gas dock walls and walks.

Major improvements for 1983 included complete remodeling of the reception area, dining and living rooms. The club offices were completely reconstructed and remodeled.

At age 22 our swimming pool needed a major face lift. As a result, in 1984, it was completely renovated with two new filtering systems.

During 1985 and 1986 shoreline erosion protection was installed at the East Beach and boat docks were elevated due to high water. House improvements included new air conditioning and heating for the bar and a new club sound system donated from the proceeds of "The Dry Rot Revue."

By 1989, the main dock bulkhead, now over 60 years old, had deteriorated to the point where it had to be replaced. Construction of a new steel and cement wall was started at the end of 1989 and completed in May of 1990 at a cost of \$445,000 – the largest single project ever undertaken at Mentor Harbor Yachting Club to date. The planting of new trees and upgrading of dock lighting along the wall greatly enhanced the appearance of the area.

In 1997 the East Beach area was improved with the addition of a picnic pavilion accommodating 100 people along with the replacement of the East Beach toilet facilities. The East Beach soon became the choice location for the club's summer parties.

In 1998 the East Beach was enhanced by a system of up-lighting into the cottonwood trees. This lighting presents a wonderful view from the club along with providing the perfect atmosphere for picnics and parties. In this same year, an irrigation system was installed encompassing the front lawns of the clubhouse.

In 1999 the underground fuel facilities were replaced and the gas dock building was demolished and rebuilt, mostly by members' donated labor.

In the year 2000, the harbor depth was accurately sounded and a major dredging effort was undertaken, including the channel north of the clubhouse as well as specific areas of the main harbor and East Beach docks.

Most great restaurants remodel their facilities every 5-7 years. And so it has been at MHYC. Major redecorating of the clubhouse, including paint, new lighting fixtures, and replacement carpeting for the dining room and bar, has occurred in 1995 and in 2003. In 2003, the consensus of member focus groups was to limit a proposed expansion of the clubhouse and instead direct capital improvement dollars to the harbor.

In 2003, a re-energized Board of Directors undertook a comprehensive \$2 million capital improvement project, similar to previous major projects (such as the permanent docks in

1952 and 1968, the swimming pool in 1961, the expansion of the club house in 1967, and harbor walls in 1990). After exhaustive studies by the harbor and house committees and numerous presentations to the membership, a major commitment was made by the Board to address the failing concrete harbor walls north of the clubhouse, reconfigure the dry sail area, and replace the 1952-era docks with floating docks. In addition, a monthly capital-improvement fee was added to the monthly dues. The demolition of the concrete channel walls and its replacement sheet steel was driven over the winter of 2004.

The removal of the West harbor steel docks and installation of floating docks, with upgraded electrical, water, telephone, fire suppression, and Wi-Fi service, occurred in early Spring, 2005. The remainder of the project, encompassing the replacement of the East Beach docks and utilities and the East Beach bulkhead wall, occurred the next year, in the Spring of 2006.