

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE MIDDLE BASS CLUB 1874-1964

By Edward L. Strater

Middle Bass, originally Isle des Fleurs of the French has indeed lived up to its name as Island of Flowers. As I write this in August the roads and fields are lined with Queen Anne's Lace, Chicory, Golden Road and a host of other wild flowers. It has always been one of those rare spots in a busy world with a fragrance and enchantment all its own. Those who have managed to come here to spend a part of each year have indeed been the lucky ones of earth. During the 90 years from 1874 until 1964 three generations have grown up here; a fourth is well on the way. For children it is particularly a paradise. It is one of the few places in this modern world where change is at a very minimum.

I have been coming here for 68 years to be exact. Back in 1896, at the time of my first visit, I looked at life from the point of view of a baby buggy I am not sure that my viewpoint has changed too much across the years. However my immediate purpose is to find some sort of scheme to hatrack all of the multitudinous ideas which flock to my mind for expression. I think that to classify them according to epoch into which the 90 years naturally divides is as sensible as any. That would be the Old Club of which my grandfather and great uncle were members, from 1874 until about 1922, the Interim Period of a few years during the mid-20s, the New Club from about 1926 or 27 'til it in turn died with the outset of War II, and finally the Middle Bass Property Owners Association which is everything but a Club in name.

The Old Club came into existence in 1874 thru purchase of land from old 'Count' Rehberg. It was at first called the Toledo and Lake Erie Fishing and Boating Association. The Old Clubhouse was built in the grove in 1874 and not replaced until the new and much larger one went up in 1882. My Grandfather's cottage was the 7th one built and went up in the autumn of 1876. That was the James Clark cottage. My great Uncle's cottage, the David Clark cottage, was the one recently occupied by Mrs. Taylor, the Northwesternmost of all. Some of the furniture in my grandfather's cottage was bought at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876. At that exposition was the first public demonstration of the brand new invention of Alexander Graham Bell, the telephone. I know this because my grandfather acquired rights and established the first telephone company in the Louisville area.

My neighbor, Mrs. Morton has some almost identical furniture in her cottage so I suspect that the original owner of that cottage too, was guilty of having been to the 1876 Exposition. Such furniture is easily identified by bouquets of flowers painted on the head and footboard of the beds and on each drawer in the bureaus. The Morton Cottage was the second one built and stood at first on the front row facing the Clubhouse. The first cottage built was the little one put up on the site of the Imburs by Mr. Isherwood. Later it was moved and having been known for years as the Dudley Dodge cottage it is now owned by Mr. Frank. Between the James Clark cottage and the one on the corner, now the Flickinger one, was the Cone cottage architecturally enough like the Mortons old cottage to be its twin. The Flickinger cottage was originally the Rodgers cottage, rebuilt by Ed Brooks after the fire of 1909 and after her husband's death, given by Florence Brooks to her nephew. She was a daughter of Mr. Rodgers and Jim was a grandson so that cottage and the James Clark cottage are the only two which have stayed in the original families. Just one more word about my cottage. When I came up in the early 1950's, I found the mounted tarpon my grandfather had caught in Florida in 1888 residing on the living room floor. This fish was mounted on a board about 7 feet long, the fish itself being a good 6 feet. It had hung in the old Clubhouse over the dining room doors for more than 60 years. When the Clubhouse was finally torn down some kind hearted person had the happy idea of salvaging the fish and depositing it in my grandfather's cottage. But alas, there was no wall husky enough or wide enough to hold it. In desperation I asked George Lonz if he didn't want it for the winery, muttering that there was an obvious connection between Florida tarpon and Middle Bass bottled goods.

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Happily he said 'yes' and there it now hangs a typical Lake Erie fish challenging the wine-bibbers to go out and catch its mate.

The Club was extremely popular from the start; there never was quite enough accommodation for all of the members and when one of the big Lake Steamers would land at Kuemmels dock, formerly the Rehberg dock, some of the gentlemen would send their small boys running ahead of them to book rooms at the Clubhouse. There was a strict rule that none could have a room longer than two weeks if the Clubhouse were full up. Four members joined together a built the Colonial cottage next to Barrs. The cottage had four apartments in it but even so it did not relieve the press very much of a popular Club. Meals for all members, cottagers as well as those staying at the Clubhouse were always in it. The kitchen of the renovated cottages is strictly a modern expediency generally installed in what was formerly a bedroom. All of the cottages were built non-housekeeping, and even the bed-making in the cottages was by Clubhouse maids. The manager was old Captain Rutherford and he was so economical that as long as he was around, the Clubhouse stayed out of debt.

There was a boathouse at the end of the grove at the Club dock with a bandstand above it. Jimmy Johnston's orchestra of Cleveland played there every afternoon of the season for the 25 years beginning about 1897. During the dinner hour the orchestra played near the dining room. Some of the gentlemen found a small ante game of cards an agreeable way of passing the evening. They would repair to the Hall and having procured a round of drinks, lock the door against intrusion from their wives and settle down in the room beneath the bar to a pleasant game of cards. This worked fine until the first round of drinks was emptied and the acute problem arose of refilling their glasses without admitting their clamoring wives. Thanks to one resourceful gent a dumb waiter was installed which ran up to the bar above and it is not recorded that a wife ever gained access to the room by descending in the dumb waiter. 'Count' Rehberg built the Hall on the strength of a gentleman's agreement with the Club. They agreed to patronize his Hall and he turned promised to reserve it for Club members exclusively, keeping out the tourist public. So every evening the gentlemen and wives and often their children would repair to the Hall to drink this and that. My mother told me that in her day when they were waxing up the floor for a dance, the children would ride on the floor-waxers. There was a bar all way across the Eastern end of the Southern half, and many tables. Across the same end of the Northern half was a raised platform with billiard tables one-armed bandits.. Halfway down the North end was a bandstand with an illuminated eagle spreadwing above it. Outside of the Southern half was a porch or gallery from which one could watch the tennis on the courts below. One or two tournaments were held back in about 1910 and very good tennis played. Later on, after the Hall was torn down tennis-watching was done from Jen Baker's porch alongside the first court. Her cottage, the biggest one of the Club was built by the Stoddard family of Dayton, makers of the Stoddard-Dayton automobile. It is now owned by Ruth Brown.

Count Rehberg had built his own home just East of the Hall and there in 1899. His son, Hermann, carried on the business 'til his own death in 1931. Walter and Isabel Swisher occupied the house for a short they were just married. Two of Hermann's nieces, granddaughters of the Old <illegible> were the cousins Amanda Schneider and Mrs. Sprow. Herman had always had a sense of devotion to the Club and just before his death he sold the hall and the vineyard in front of it to a Syndicate of Club members who bought the land to protect the adjoining Club property. The Syndicate held it a few years and sold it to Bill Kuemmel, who cut down the grapes and used the bare land for spreading out and drying his fish nets.

Bill was caretaker of the New Club and thru much of its life, Don Martin was manager. Don's sister, Betty, was head waitress. Bill died in April, 1949. No one who has ever heard it can forget his cheerful 'alloooo' as he approached a cottage. He made

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innumerable trips down to the Club to fix the old Delco system which stood by the Lake shore in front of Ted Beckwith's cottage, now Webers and formerly the Shoemaker cottage. His good wife Anna still lives in their home at the end of the dock, which we have seen was originally Rehberg's dock. The ice house where ice was cut and stored stood nearby.

One of Bill and Anna's sons-in-law is Cap't Parker, of the Erie Isle out of Port Clinton. Their two sons, Henry and Otto helped their father as caretaker of the New Club. Bill had started working the grapes for his uncle, but soon had bought a boat and become a net fisherman. This business was very profitable but gradually Lake Erie 'white fish' became something of the past and perch an almost unknown quantity.

I have heard talk of the 7 Presidents who came to these shores. Actually I incline to settle for two who I know to have been here. Benjamin Harrison spent a month here at a Berdan cottage in 1892 and wrote his acceptance speech. Grover Cleveland was here for I have seen his name in an old register. A third President was here by proxy, Webb Hayes, a grandson of Rutherford B. having been a member. Webb's wife was Marty Baker, a twin sister of Bill Baker, whose wife was Jen Baker mentioned elsewhere. Jen's brother was Avery Wright, one of those ever popular men known in at least a dozen big cities, always a lot of fun in whatever crowd he happened to be with.

In its heyday, there were some 28 cottages, but 2 fires took down 8 of them. Three of these were rebuilt, by members of the same families. The two old Berdan cottages were rebuilt, and are now the Cizl and the one just West of it, the Brooks cottage was rebuilt on the site of the Old Rodgers cottage. There was also a Chapel between Pietschman and Butch Hill, and there Alfred Robyn a talented composer from St. Louis would play by the hour. There was a fountain between Olesick, originally the MacMillan cottage, and Cizl, and this was always a popular place to have one's picture taken. Then there were the squirrels, always most charming members of the Club. My grandfather had brought Sammy, the original progenitor of the tribe up from Louisville.

The contrast between the Old Club and the new was as sharp a one as can well be made. Each was so definitely a product of its own era and those two eras although separated by only one generation were as contrasting as could be. The old Club was born in 1874 and came to a slow lingering end about in 1922. That was the period of the great steamers which plied the Lakes, carrying excursionists hither and yon. The Chief Justice Waite, and later the City of Toledo and Greyhound were all boats from Toledo, the Kirby and later the Put-In-Bay were out of Detroit, and the Arrow out of Sandusky. That was the period of Johnston's orchestra, of Capt. Rutherford as manager, in readings for the young ladies in English literature by old Mrs. Miller, in her cottage now Pietschmans. The young gentlemen would spend many of their evenings at the bench halfway down the walk to Rehberg's dock harmonizing Moonlight Bay or others of the Classics.

The old Club died slowly and lingeringly and amidst a salvo of assessments in about 1922. In retrospect, it is easy enough to see the underlying cause the lack of golf and the lack of facilities for automobiling. These were the brand new sports of the moment sweeping everything before them. There was a brief interim period of several years while a Mrs. Smith rented the Clubhouse and ran it as a resort hotel, and then all of a sudden a beautiful young phoenix rose from the ashes of the old. In every case, those who started the new Club were descendants of old members and had acquired old family cottages. Pete (Mrs. Sinclair Walbridge) started the vogue. She was a prominent young society matron of Toledo. The Bakers, the Berdans, the Beckwiths, the Baumgardners, the Kinseys, the MacAbees, the Brooks, the Minnells, the Logans, the Hixons, the Wrights, the Straters, Harold Norton, Horace Suydam and many others, all started coming back and making the Club their very own. This new Club lasted thru the 1930's and then it in time died, this time irrevocably because the cottages were sold to non-

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members. Most of these new Club members were Toledoans and all were members of very prominent families. The tempo of life had changed significantly. Morals, manners, and dress were all far more casual. Hard drinking and informality were probably the hall marks of this younger generation just as a heavy and somewhat pompous stiffness, formality and correctness was the hallmark of the past generation.

Back in 1928 all of the young people were well-to-do and everyone owned a speedboat buzzing around at great speed over the lake and accomplishing just nothing. This seemed to be a hallmark of the well-named lost generation. During the lean years following the 1929 crash the Club became even more popular as family income continued to shrink and the relative expense of going farther afield to a Northern Lake Michigan Resort, let us say, became more and more prohibitive. As people began to bail out from the lean years of depression during several years there was a series of Malabars all 50 foot and over ketches. These boats were chartered by Ted Beckwith, Eddie Brooks and Phil MacAbee.

In no field was the contrast between the old and the new Club more evident than in swimming. Originally one swam from a short stretch of beach beyond Anna Kuemmel's. Bath houses had been erected there and thither the Old members hied for the momentous occasion represented by 'bathing'. Actual swimming was, of course, out of the question. The women dressed preposterously with stockings and skirts on and even the poor men had on suits which went down to their wrists and ankles. They did the best they could. I dare say, but a pleasant afternoon consisted in standing in whatever little surf there was and jumping up and down amid squeals from the gentler sex. In the new Club days this beach was forgotten and abandoned. One changed into trunks in his cottage and walked down to the dock and dived off the end. There was a Club dock in those days, which was maintained out of the private resources of several of the better-off members. And hither Miller Boat taxis were constantly plying carrying members and visitors to and from Catawba Point.

In the prohibition days members of the new Club never ran out of drink because the friendly Canadian shore was always quite close. There was a well-established routine. One couple or several would organize an expedition, hire a speed boat and head for Pelee Island. Once there you had but to spend a dollar, register at a Canadian Hotel and for purposes of visiting the liquor store you were then a full-fledged Canadian resident. The store was quite handy to the boat landing. On the way back to Middle Bass, there was an understanding that if pursued by a U. S. Revenue boat you would jettison the cargo, but to my recollection this emergency never arose. As far as I was concerned, the drive back across Ohio to Kentucky was the hazardous part of the undertaking. My wife and I had a small Chevy roadster with a rumble seat. Our children were young and they and my wife, who was driving, and our dogs were all somehow crowded into the front. I was squeezed into the rumble seat alongside a towering pile of 6 or 7 cases of contraband liquor. We started from the Lakeshore in the late afternoon and by supper had gotten as far as the hotel in Lima. There she stopped and I suddenly alarmed began to knock furiously on the glass. 'If you think I'm going to put this car with all of this booze aboard in a strange garage tonight' I yelled, 'you're crazy.' She retaliated: 'If you think I'm going to drive all night with the children then you're crazy.' So what else was there to do. We compromised; she and the children drove the car out, slept at the Hotel and I found a nice quiet lane end mounted guard on our cargo. To do myself credit for this heroic episode, I will say that the only bottle I lost for this manoeuvre was the one I had pulled on during the wee small hours to keep my strength up.

A trip to the Bay was always a red letter event, altho, there was really nothing to do there. Bill Haas was agent for the Western Union and if one wanted to send a telegram he had to go over to Bill's store. Going to Herbesters to have one's picture taken was always popular. In the old Club days one would have gone out to the Victory for lunch perhaps. That great big resort Hotel burned to the ground in 1919. During the new Club

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days Kay Beckwith and Phil MacAbee made an annual excursion, taking all of the kids. They would get taxis over there and tour the caves, and then if they had been very good children, polite and obedient, they would be allowed to rent tandem bicycles.

The monument was dedicated in 1913 being the 150th anniversary of Battle of Lake Erie which it commemorates. It is 352 feet high. It is strange indeed to think that these quiet peaceful isles reverberated to the sound of guns a bare century and a half ago. Yet the artillery range at Camp Perry is a current day reminder.

The best time NOT to go to the Bay is during the annual regatta in early August. From midnight on, all along the waterfront one can hear pathetic cries of 'Mil-Ler' as stray crew, members are trying to summon a boat taxi to get themselves out to boat and bunk. Yet that same woebegone creature of the wee small hours would be up and ready to go at the crack of dawn no matter what his condition the evening before.

Speaking of boats the big ones died off slowly. The Greyhound out of Toledo was running as late as 1928 because my wife and I rode on her. Probably the last of them all was the Old Put-In-Bay of which Capt. Peterson was skipper. Her last daily run was Labor Day afternoon as she headed back for Detroit. Club members would gather around the flagstaff and as she passed by Kay Beckwith would dip our flag in salute. Captain Fox would thereupon blow his big whistle in acknowledgement and that was officially the end of the season for both sides of the ceremony. Within a few days families would be closing up their cottages and leaving for town to start the children in a fresh year of school.

Happily, there have been very few tragedies to mar the pleasant years on the Island. In the early 1900's, a young member of the Berdan family was drowned while out sailing. Then there was the little girl who accidentally one Fourth of July shot her brother. That cottage right behind Cizls and right across from Hillers has been torn down. There were two big fires each of which burned down 3 or 4 cottages. The fire of TTT burned down the old Peter Berdan cottage and the old John Berdan one. Both of these were rebuilt by members of the same families. Then the fire of 1909 took the Cone cottage, the Rodgers and several other cottages. My family was not up that summer, but I know that our cottage was saved by members breaking in the door - using blankets with water and hanging them up on the sides of the cottage.

There were various near tragedies of course, especially when children would be caught out in a boat as a sudden storm approached. Happily the children did not stand up in the boats which would most certainly have brought on fatal endings. Everyone who came here was something of a water rat. But quite a few of the parents did more praying as they stood on the dock watching their children struggle against the wind than they did at any other time of their lives.

The most recent real tragedy was the sudden death of Charley Schneider, a great grandson of Count Rehberg's in February, 1955. Like Bill Kuemmel, Charley was a net fisherman. Charley and his wife Thelma, our popular postmistress had driven across the ice to the dance at the Bay and were on their way back to Middle Bass, in fact just a few yards from the shore, when their car suddenly broke thru the ice and went down. Their son, Sonny, skipper of the ferry 'Sonny' to the Bay, was following them in another car. He dashed up to the edge of the break and not seeing his mother jumped in and pulled her out. It was not for five minutes or so before they noticed that Charley had not come up. Some hours later they got him out. He was sitting behind the wheel of his Ford in 125 feet of water, with his foot hard pressed down on the accelerator. There was much evidence that Charley had met his end not thru drowning, but as a result of a heart attack and that he was already dead when the car broke thru the ice.

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But there are always funny things to offset the stark tragedy life can so easily dish up. There was, for instance, Leroy Brooks' very big St. Bernard dog, Imp., for Emperor. Now Imp after having been fetched to the Island on one boat had conceived a violent distaste for a repeat performance. He was not entirely happy about it, but nevertheless somewhat stoically resigned to spending the rest of his days on the Island. When the day came for his removal and the boat was at the dock awaiting his pleasure, Imp took off in the opposite direction and finding an outside Johnny on a back porch got in there and lay down between the door which opened inwards and the John. Leroy could not force the door open against his dead weight nor could he persuade or coax Imp out.

Thru it all, Old Club, Interim, New Club, M. B. Property Owners Assn., the Old Water Tower stands at the very tip of the West End of the Island. It is the very first thing one sees as the Miller Boat comes around the bend on the way to Middle Bass, and equally, the very last thing one sees on the Island as one leaves in the autumn.

To me it means that all is right in a very right world, a symbol of the complete peace and pleasure one can always find on our heavenly Isle. . .

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