

# The Early



# Years

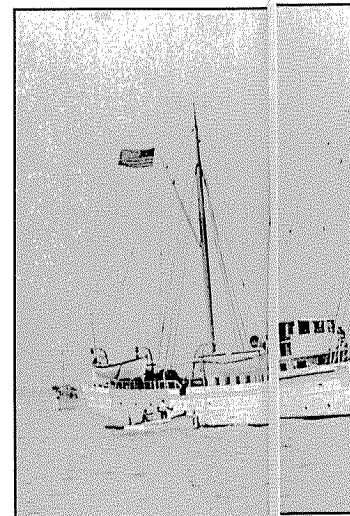
1877-1900





The second clubhouse was constructed in 1889 on the west bank of the river close to the south end of a roller coaster on Ontario Beach Park. The site had a frontage of about 60 feet on the river and a depth of about 165 feet. The building was 42 x 65 feet on the ground and three stories high. Unfortunately, no picture is

available of RYC's first home. It is known that it was located on the east side of the river on the beach a bit east of the current US Coast Guard facility. The two-story building was approximately 83 x 25 ft. It formally opened on June 23, 1877. Apparently destroyed by fire, it was not rebuilt.



Typical spectator fleet.

## GREAT BEGINNINGS

In spite of what you might think, 123-year-old yacht clubs are not all that easy to find. Even Newport Yacht Club, R.I. in one of the sailing capitals of the east, is only 103 years old. So it is much to the credit of Lake Ontario and early Rochesterians that the pleasure of yachting has had such a long and successful tradition in this area.

As noted in the *Rounding the Century Mark* book of 1977, piecing together the early years of Rochester Yacht Club was not a simple task. Time has not completely erased the beginnings, but 123-year-old records are sparse and hard to find. So this will not be a precisely detailed history. Rather it will sketch the character of the Club from its founding to the present and describe yachting on the Genesee River and Lake Ontario as it was during the early years.

Rochester from its first years has been an inland city. Most of its growth took place where the Erie Canal intersected the Genesee River. However, just a few miles north, where the same Genesee emptied into Lake Ontario, there was a beautiful natural harbor with protected anchorage that was accessible to city residents interested in yachting. This same harbor served as a commercial port for the region and for a long period was an important factor in the development of industry and commerce in the city.

Rochester Yacht Club has had a history heavily interrelated with the development of the City itself and has been affected by the growth and decline of commercial shipping in the area. The first attempt to establish a permanent yachting organization was in the early part of April 1874 when the Genesee Yacht Club was formed. The following August it adopted a constitution, elected officers and held its first regatta.

The Club had a membership of 45 and a fleet of 18 yachts.

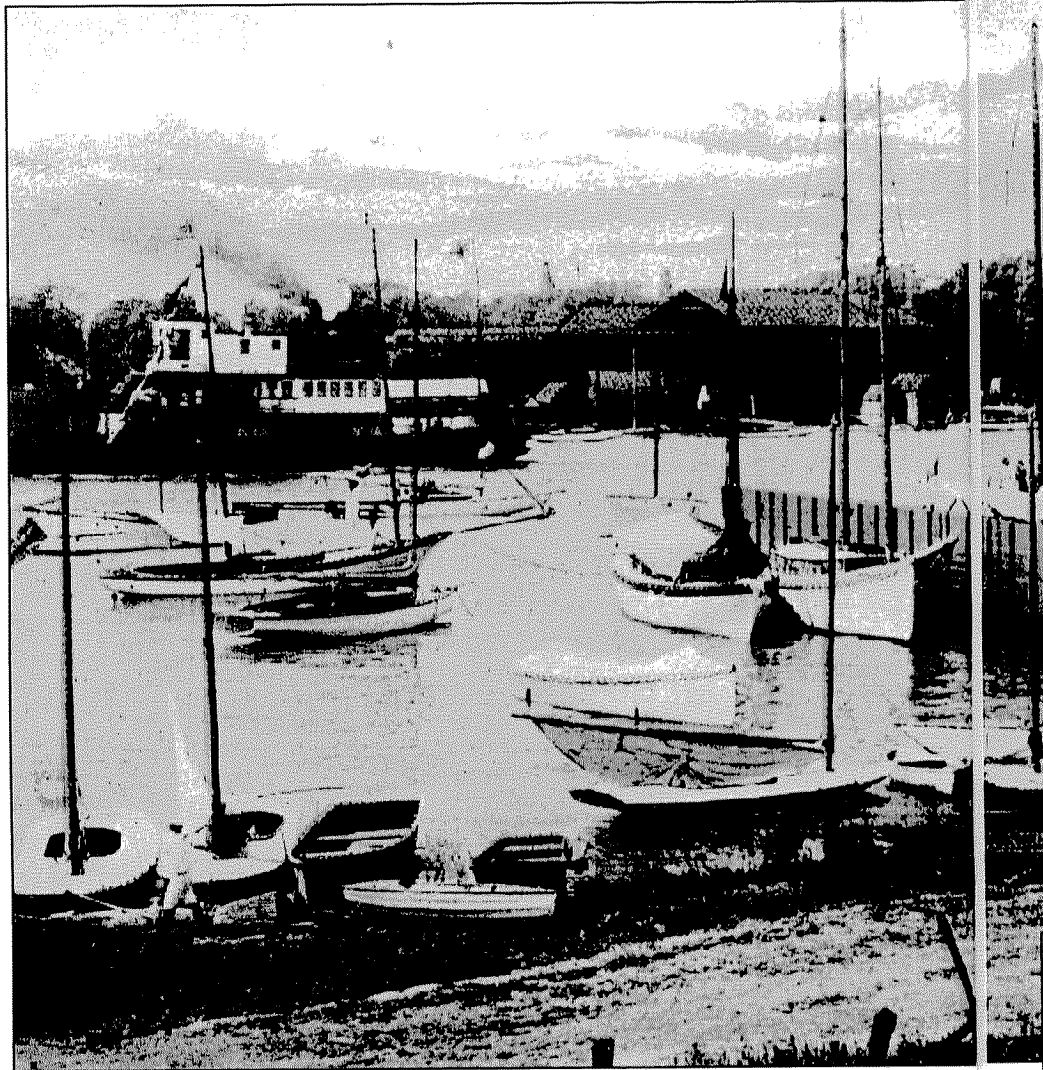
*Titania* was the largest boat and, although not very fast, she was a good cruiser. *Seth Green* was the winner in the fleet and it was generally conceded that this was "more an account of the masterly way that the boat was sailed than on any merit the craft itself contained."

During the few short years of its existence, the Genesee Yacht Club held a number of popular yachting events. In 1875, an International Regatta was held off Ontario Beach. The description of this event as reported in the book *The Yachts and Yachtsmen of America* stated:

*The second day was fully interesting and included a race for first class yachts at 10:30 a.m. over a course of 24 miles; the prizes being cash and amounting to \$100. This was followed at 4:00 p.m. by a single scull race over a course of two miles*  
(continued on page 19)



The historian's say this is another view of the west side clubhouse.



**Drawing a crowd...**

His first sailing experience was newsworthy enough to make the *Times Union*.

"My friend and I used to sit on the beach watching small sail boats. With no previous experience we bought a sailing dinghy called *Bluebird* from two brothers and joined RYC to sail in the dinghy fleet of about eight 14' boats.

Our first sailing experience took place on the 4th of July; we took it out on the Genesee River and

managed to tip it over. According to the paper, the incident drew over a crowd of 2,000. With the Coast Guard as personal instructors, the two of us were given a lesson on how to raise the spar.

From there on we made it to the lake. Often, during regattas, crews from other boats would ask us to join them. Thus, there was a progression of racing type boats until I eventually brought a boat from Denmark for family sailing."

John Bushfield (member since 1932)  
Commodore, 1965, 1966

\*At its inception in 1877 the Rochester Yacht Club had a president, Mr. E. Clifton, and a commodore, Mr. W. Lincoln Sage. Upon re-activation in December of 1886, the management structure changed to one similar to today's with Mr. George H. Newell serving as commodore.

\*1877 - E. Clifton,  
President & W. Lincoln  
Sage, Commodore

1890 -  
George H.  
Newell,  
Commodore



1891 - John R. White,  
Commodore

on the river for which two prizes, valued at \$35, were given. At 5:00 p.m. there was a swimming match from the east to the west pier and return for a prize

of \$8.00, and the day closed with free-for-all skiff race over a mile course for a cash prize. It will be readily seen from this program that yachting has been from its first introduction here a favorite sport and one well patronized by Rochesterians.

The Rochester Union and Advertiser (U&A) edition of July 30, 1892, in describing the history of yachting in this city, stated:

*The boat (Seth Green) was always under personal management of the veteran yachtsman whose name she bore. In competition with the embryo-sailors who manned the other yachts, she had no trouble in securing first prize in any race she cared to enter, and there is no doubt that it was owing to the monotonous taking of prizes on the part of Seth Green which contributed to the final dissolution of the club (Genesee Yacht Club).*

Whether the monotonous racing success of the *Seth Green* did in fact contribute to the final dissolution of the club we cannot be certain, but it does seem clear that the original Genesee Yacht Club ceased to exist sometime in 1876. In the words of the U&A:

*It gave way to the Rochester Yacht Club in 1876; an organization that was started and run on entirely different lines from its successful predecessor and managed by an entirely different set of officers.*

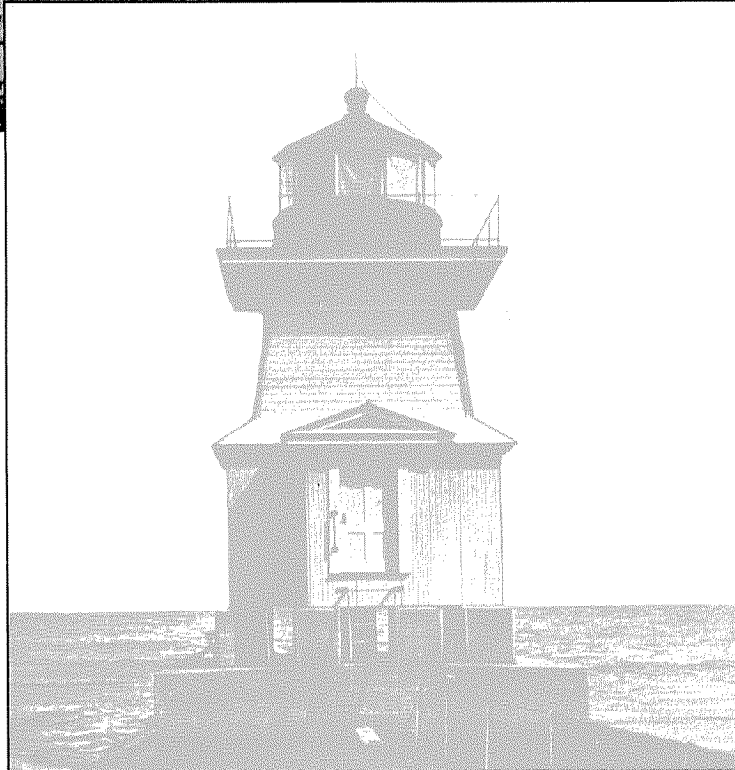
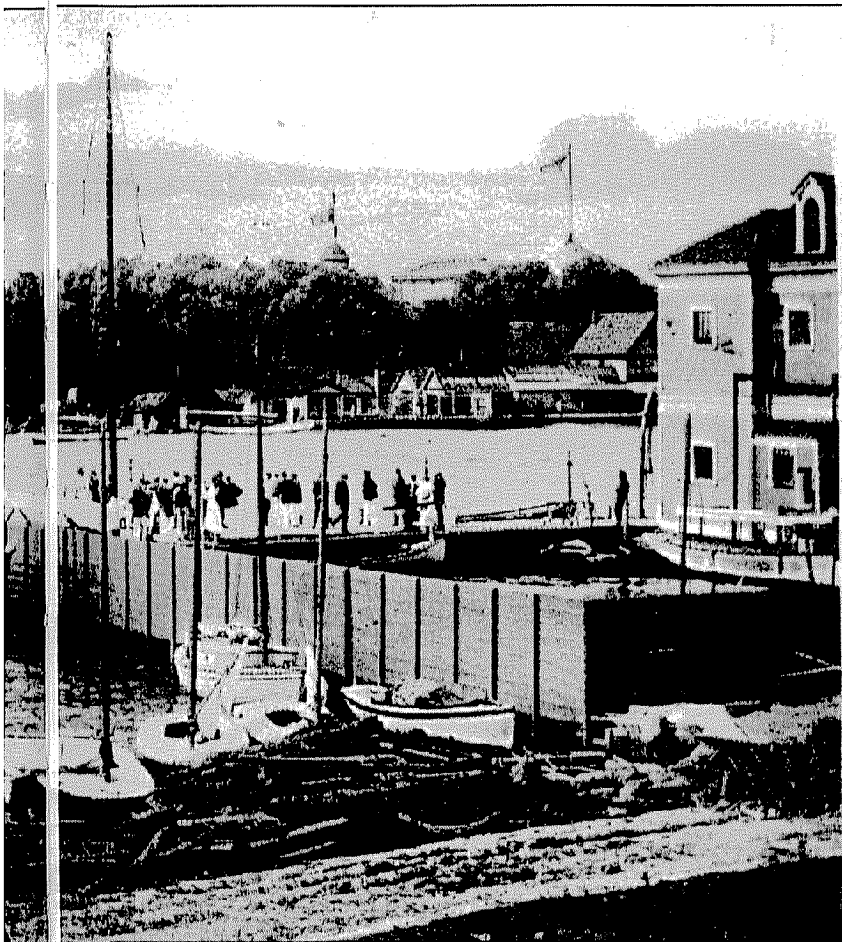
As a benchmark in US history, 1876 marked the Battle of Little Big Horn or "Custers Last Stand."

## THE FIRST CLUBHOUSE AND THE FIRST REGATTA

The Rochester Yacht Club was incorporated in April of 1877. Elected Commodore was E. Clifton. Confirmation of 1877 as the starting date of Rochester Yacht Club is contained in the William F. Peck, *History of Rochester, New York*, published 1884, which states that:

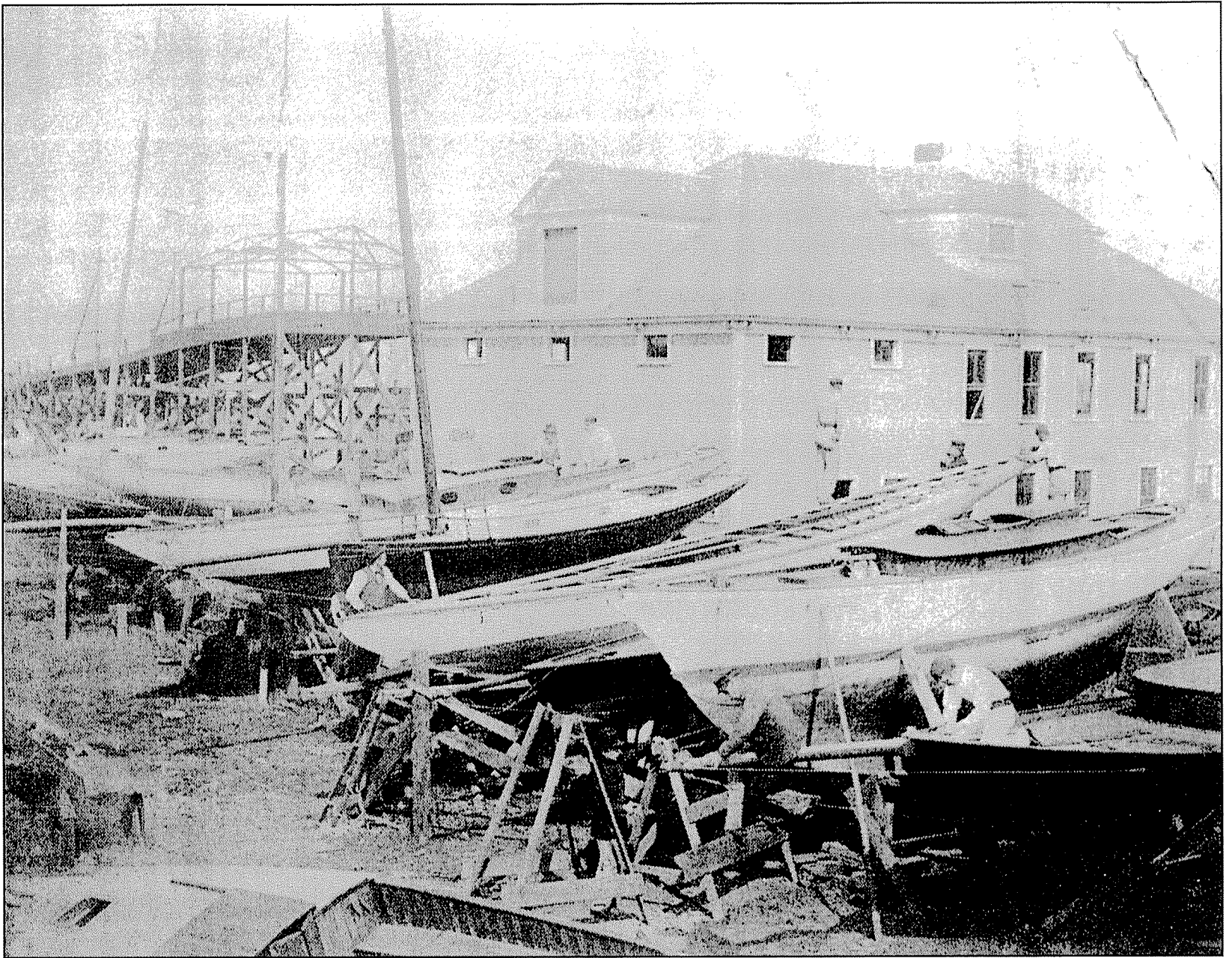
*In the course of the summer (1877) the Rochester Yacht Club, which had been organized in the spring, built a clubhouse at Summerville.*

The first regatta was planned for July 16, 1877. The regatta committee decided to throw the race open to all boats in Monroe County, whether members of the club or not. This liberal policy had the effect of drawing out a large number of entries. Measurement rules being a problem even then, the committee stated:



1892 - Matthew Cartwright, Commodore

Early west pier lighthouse.



*The race would be sailed under the regulations of the Club that are broad enough in their views to afford every boat an equal chance. Time allowances would be calculated by the proper standard, and every boat previous to sailing would be measured by the Club Measurer:*

The course was planned as a 12-mile triangle and after the race an attempt would be made to hold a review of the yachts in front of the clubhouse which, should the wind be favorable, would afford the spectators a very pretty sight. Shortly after the regatta, the *U&A* described the day as follows:

*Although extensive preparation had been made for a large crowd, it was hardly expected that such numbers would be on hand. The 1:30 p.m. train came down with 11 coaches, loaded to their utmost, and the following train brought six more coach loads. The people who came represented the greatest concourse that has visited the lake on any day this year:*

Imagine it, 17 railroad cars of spectators traveling from the then inland city to watch a sailboat race, in a city that only 60 years earlier was considered as wilderness. One perspective of the magnitude of this event was that in the 1870s, Pittsford was a day's wagon trip from the city.

Eight yachts entered this first Rochester Yacht Club regatta, including the *Annette*, *Gem*, *Ida*, *Belle*, *Newport*, *Seth Green*, *Ripple* and *Storm*. Unfortunately the wind was uncooperative and in the words of one skipper "the light breeze made it rather tedious sailing." In fact, the five-hour limit expired and the first Rochester Yacht Club regatta ended as "no race."

The VanVoorhis families who have sailed on Lake Ontario for more than 100 years covering five generations, incidentally, owned *Storm*.

## THE COMPASS

Almost nothing can be found about the Club for the next 10 years as it apparently became dormant for reasons that are not clear.

In 1881 there was a yacht club somewhere near the site of our present establishment. A newspaper of that year printed the following:

*Joseph C. Tone, owner of a large part of Summerville, says he will not rebuild the Rochester Yacht Club house, which was burned last week. He proposes instead to put up some fine new cottages on the site.*

*If the cottages were built, they are gone but the Rochester Yacht Club lives on.*

Mr. Tone was the Commodore of the 1874 Genesee Yacht Club, treasurer of the 1877 Rochester Yacht Club, and presumably the individual who made a "gift" of the land to the Club.

The mystery of what became of the 1877 Rochester Yacht Club has baffled Club historians for many years. Whether it was a recession, financial difficulty, conflict among the members or lack of surviving records that caused the gap in Club history we may never know, but from newspaper reports of the period it would seem unlikely that it was a result of a lack of interest in yachting.

During the summer of 1885 the managers of the Hotel Ontario, as an additional attraction for their resort, arranged a regatta to be sailed over the old course of the Genesee Yacht Club. Invitations were sent to all the yachts on the lake asking them to participate. The result was the gathering of a large fleet at Ontario Beach and a most successful regatta.

Apparently as a result of the renewed interest in racing generated by this regatta, late in November 1886, a meeting of gentlemen interested in the formation of a yacht club was held at the Clinton House and a committee was formed to present a constitution and by-laws at the following meeting.

The *U&A* reported on a meeting held on December 13, 1886, when a constitution and by-laws were adopted, officers and directors were elected, and the Rochester Yacht Club again became an active organization.

A copy of the original constitution states: "The object of said yacht club shall be to increase the interest in matters appertaining to yachting, and encourage the construction, ownership and sailing of yachts." George H. Newell was elected Commodore.

It is interesting to note that Commodore Newell was a member of the 1874 Genesee Yacht Club and active in the formation of the original 1877 Rochester Yacht Club as well.

## THE BURGEE

At the December 29, 1886 executive committee, meeting a subcommittee was appointed to visit Charlotte next Saturday morning for the purpose of deciding on a practical plan for a harbor. The *U&A* report of the meeting also stated:

*The Club signal adopted is a pointed pennant, blue in the center with a broad red border. The letter "R" is in the center. The flag officers'*

*pennants adopted are of swallow tail form: the Commodore's being blue, the Vice Commodore's red, and the Captain's white. Each has a fouled anchor in the center and circled by stars. The private signal adopted is an oblong swallow tail flag and may bear any design that suits the taste of the yachtsman. All Club and private signals are to have one-inch in length for each foot of distance between deck and truck. The width is to be 2/3 of the length.*

Commodore Newell and other directors executed a charter certificate on April 4, 1887. It was certified by Daffell D. Sully, Commissioner of Deeds of the City of Rochester, approved by James L. Angle, Supreme Court Justice, and duly recorded and filed by the Secretary of State of New York on the 14th of April 1887.

At that time the Club had 46 charter members and listed 15 vessels in its original roll of yachts. In 1887, the population of Rochester was about 120,000 and the new Rochester Yacht Club joined the recently formed Lake Yacht Racing Association (LYRA). Other members at that time were Royal Canadian Yacht Club, Bay of Quinte Yacht Club, Oswego Yacht Club and Toronto Yacht Club, which was soon to merge with Royal Canadian Yacht Club.

In July 1887, the new Club held its first regatta under the auspices of LYRA and it was a decided success. Many of the representative yachts of the different clubs on the lake took part.

Almost immediately upon its re-activation, RYC became one of the major yacht clubs on Lake Ontario and its members soon became known as some of the nation's most skilled yachtsmen.

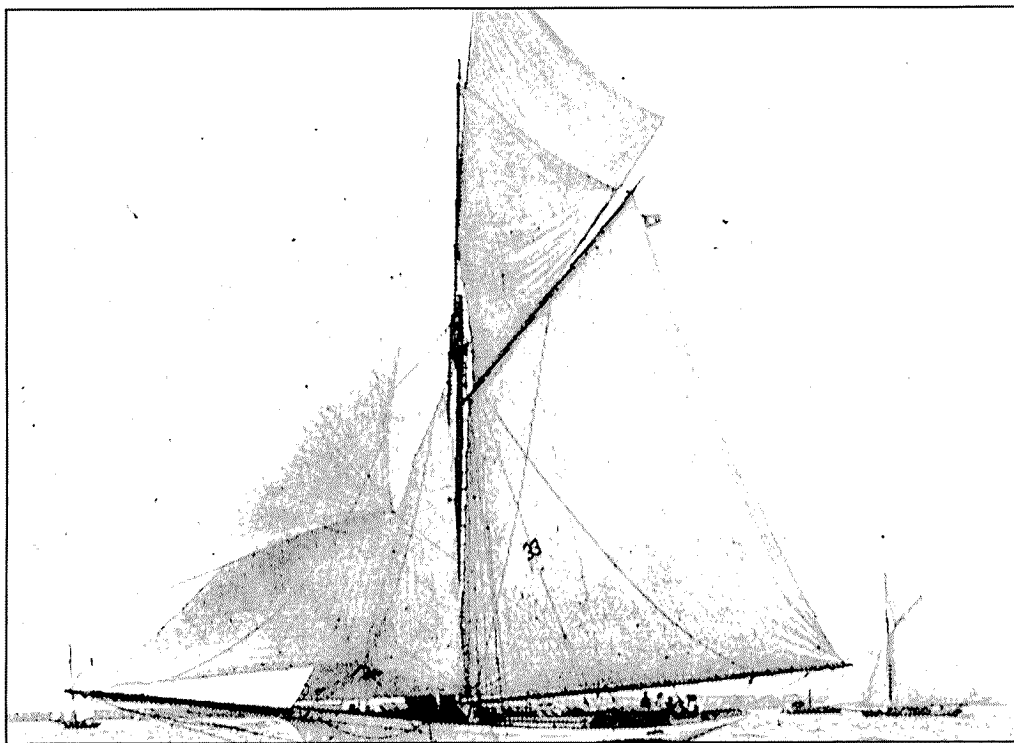
## MORE ABOUT THE SECOND CLUBHOUSE

In the spring of 1889, the members realized the need for a home and plans for one were soon underway. The *U&A* reported on April 15, 1889, that:

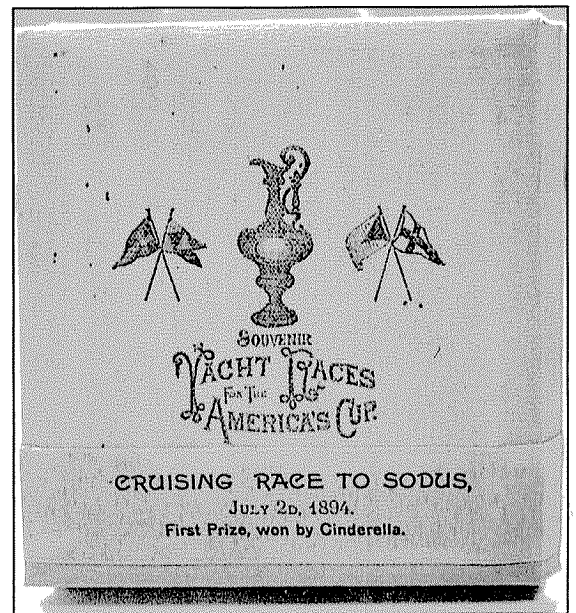
*It is likely that Rochester Yacht club will have a clubhouse soon. The site has been secured on Ontario Beach, which has a frontage of about 60 feet and a depth of about 165. The north line was close to the south end of the roller coaster. According to the plans, which have been prepared by Otis N. Crandall, the building will be 42' x 65' on the ground and three stories in height. The style of architecture will be similar to that of the buildings of the Ontario Beach Improvement Company and the general appearance of the building will be tasteful and pretty.*

Just north of the present railroad swing bridge a large blast furnace was located, operated by the Rochester Iron Manufacturing Company.





*Cinderella*



The silver spoons awarded to *Cinderella* were elegantly encased.



The RYC Clubhouse was in front of the blast furnace and south of the amusement park in Charlotte.

The construction was financed with the sale of \$2,500 of clubhouse bonds and the building was completed shortly thereafter. At about the same time Club rooms were secured in the Ellwanger and Barry Building in downtown Rochester.

During the first few years the initiation fee was \$10 and yearly dues were \$6. Dues were almost immediately raised to \$10, and in the spring of 1892, raised again to \$12. Non-resident dues were \$6 per year. In 1892, the Club built a marine railway in Charlotte, capable of hauling out the largest boat of the fleet and with ample sidetracks for laying up during the winter.

The earliest surviving official publication of Rochester Yacht Club is a Club book dated 1892, which covers the years from 1887 through 1892. It was prepared by the committee of T.B. Pritchard, James Pillow, Charles A. Worts, and E.N. Walbridge and sold for \$1.00 per copy.

The 1892 List of Members shows 157 members plus three deceased. The registry of yachts lists 29 sailboats, the largest of which was the 63-foot centerboard cutter *Cinderella* owned by I.L.K. Dryer, and seven steam and naphtha power boats, capped by the 98-foot-steam launch *Siesta* owned by H.H. Warner with a home port of Alexandria Bay. The largest Charlotte-based powerboat was the 35-foot-*Cynet* owned by Shipman Engine Company.

## THE MADGE

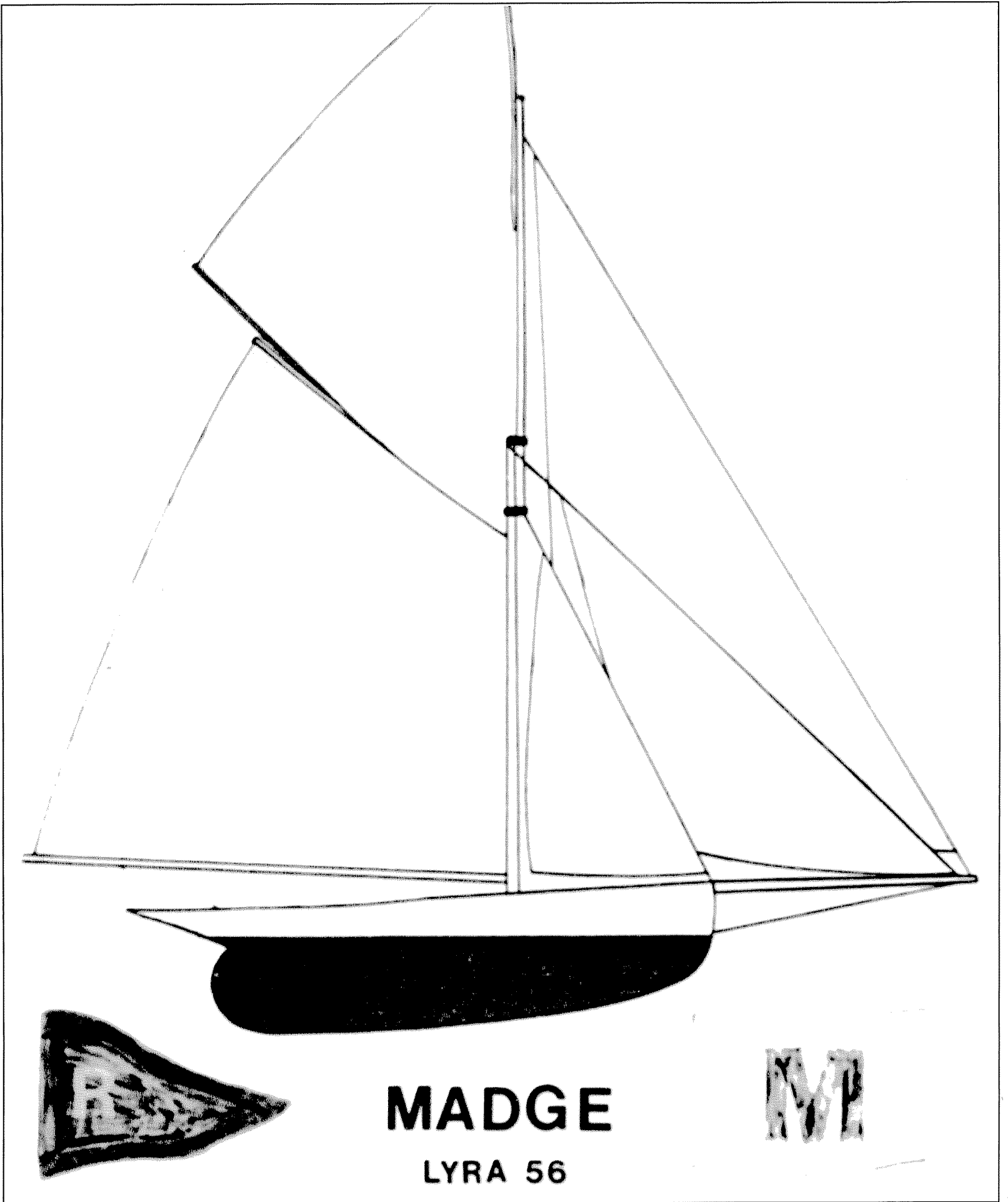
This early fleet included such well-known sailboats as the *Madge*, *Majel*, *Velnette*, and *Nox*. The following excerpt from the March 21, 1888, edition of the *U&A* gives some idea of the character of this fleet:

*The Madge was built at Gowan, Scotland, in 1879, for James Coates of Paisley, Scotland, and won a number of match races in English waters before she came to this country. George L. Watson, the designer of the Thisbe and other notable cutters, designed her.*

*When she first came to New York, American yachtsmen laughed at her until she completely distanced their favorite sloops: Schemer and Wave. She astonished the natives by winning six out of seven races, which were arranged for her. Her remarkable success caused the New Yorkers to adopt some of the Madge's features in modeling new boats such as the Puritan, Priscilla, Atlantic, Mayflower and Volunteer.*

*The dimensions of the Madge were 46-ft. long overall, 32-ft. waterline, and 7 ft. 8 in. beam, 9 ft. 7 in. depth and 7 ft. 8 in. draft. She is 16-ton register and has 10 ton of lead in her keel.*





**MADGE**

**LYRA 56**

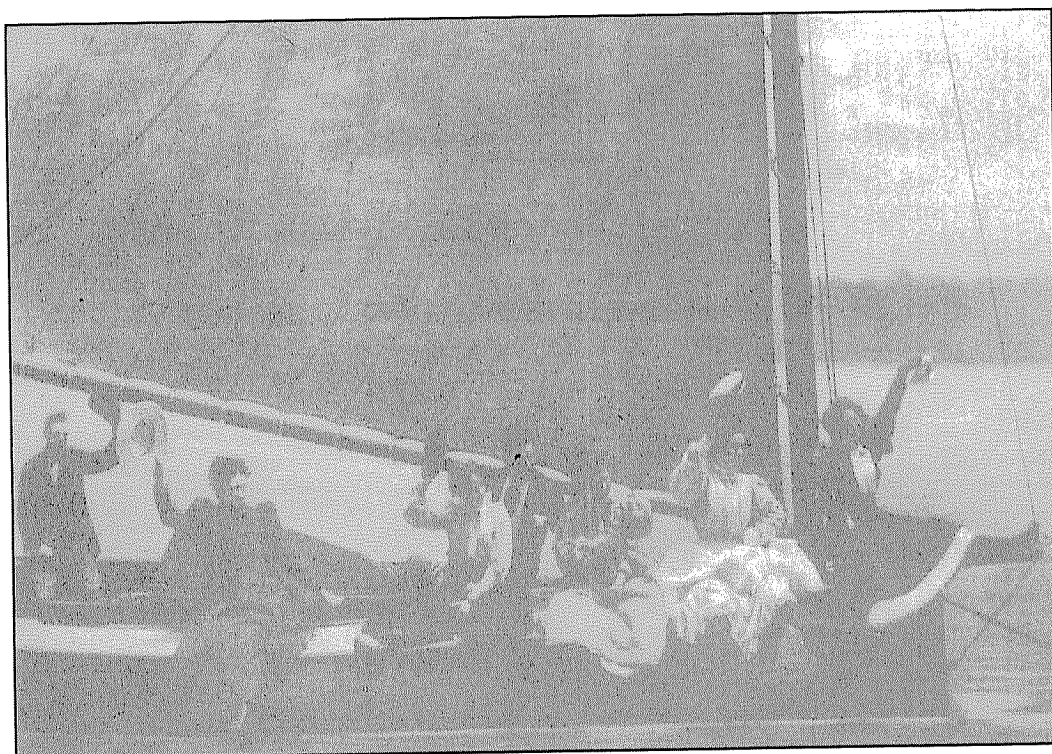
*Her mast was 34 ft. with a topmast of 25 ft., bowsprit 27 ft. main boom, 36 ft. with spinnaker boom 28 ft.*

The original Constitution, Bylaws, and House Rules of Rochester Yacht Club were included in the 1892 Club book. The Constitution is unremarkable and, in fact, there have been surprisingly few changes through the years.

The Bylaws, on the other hand, in addition to chapters on fees, charges, and the conduct of meetings, has lengthy sections on flags, rules regulating the display of colors and private signals, saluting procedures, etiquette for welcoming foreign yachts and for visiting foreign ports, and standards for both dress uniforms and service uniforms. Only a small part of this tradition and ritual has survived, and it may be that the Club is poorer as a result.

## HOUSE RULES

- No intoxicating liquors shall be drunk on the Club premises.
- No intoxicated person will be permitted in or about the clubhouse.
- Steward will report violation of this rule to the Executive Committee.
- Repetition will be ground for expulsion.
- No gambling of any kind will be allowed on the Club premises. No game of any sort will be allowed on the Club premises on Sunday.
- The Ladies Parlor is for the ladies' exclusive use; positively no gentleman allowed therein.
- Children will not be allowed on the Club premises unless accompanied by adults.



### For the love of boat building...

Born and bred in Charlotte, **Benny O'Brien** learned about sailing from his grandfather who had run away at age 14 to crew on a square-rigger. Working on the merry-go-round summers during high school, he used to watch people sailing. Working days meant that sailing could only be done at night with Dwight Bliss, Miles' father, on an 18' Seagull with a centerboard.

After high school, Benny worked for Miller's Boat Works, where he and Wes Dawes helped to repair boats. During their lunch hour the two would paddle a dory-type kayak over to watch Triangle Marine being developed, where the owner, Charles Angle, planned to build boats. RJYC members now use this building. Eventually Angle hired these two young men as boat builders.

Benny's first project was to complete a 24' bare hull for Andrew Wolfe's wife. "I put in the galley, interior, floors, deck, four simple berths, two quarter berths, a head, and cockpit using various electric drills, screwdriver and saws. The greatest period of my life was during the time I was building boats," Benny said.

Being close to RYC, he knew most of the members and associated with lots of sailors. Benny raced every Sunday morning, usually on Jolly boats. Frank Shumway encouraged him to join RYC. He did.

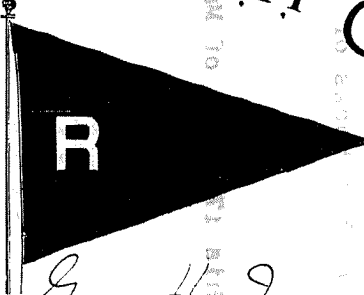
Benny O'Brien (member since 1961)

Ladies day out !

No. 87

\$10.00.

# ROCHESTER YACHT CLUB.



This is to Certify, that

*Geo. H. Newell*

has advanced and paid to the Rochester Yacht Club, for the purpose of building a Club House at Charlotte, N. Y., the sum of **TEN DOLLARS**, which sum the Rochester Yacht Club hereby promises and binds itself to repay in **TEN YEARS** from the date hereof, with interest, payable annually after one year from the last named date, at the rate of four per cent. per annum. This is one of a series of **THREE HUNDRED BONDS** of like tenor and date, amounting in all to (\$3,000) Three Thousand Dollars, and the Club reserves the right to pay the same at any time before the expiration of the **TEN YEARS** above mentioned, in sums of not less than One Dollar on each and every bond.

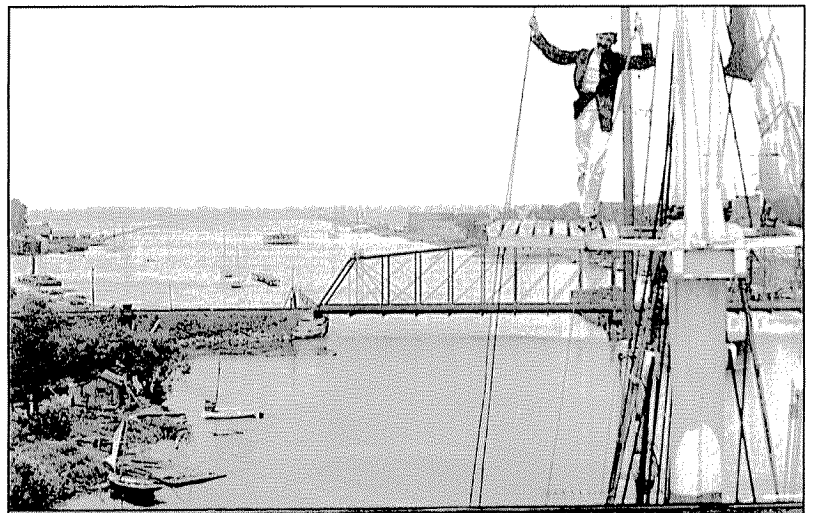
For the Rochester Yacht Club,

For the Rochester Yacht Club,

*J. E. Burroughs* Treasurer.

*Geo. H. Newell* Commodore.

Rochester, N. Y., June 15, 1889.



View of the Genesee from the yardarm.

1893 - Edward N. Walbridge, Commodore

1894 - Henry S. Mackie, Commodore



1895 - Arthur T. Hagen, Commodore



## CLUB RACING

During the 1890s and early 1900s a very active racing program was developed. Dinghies and handicap classes in 20, 25 and 30-foot measurement sizes were used.

## THE CANADA'S CUP

Rochester Yacht Club sailors have competed in a myriad of venues and countless craft, from dinghies to maxis, from Club races to the Olympics. One of the most colorful chapters in this history centers on the Canada's Cup.

The Canada's Cup, as symbolic of fresh water sailing supremacy as the America's Cup is of salt water, was for the 51 years from 1903 to 1954 the proudest display in the RYC trophy case.

For nearly 60 years, RYC was the only American Club to earn the Cup and in seven out of nine contests the Cup stayed on the south shore of the Great Lakes.

### 1896

The Cup is named for the cutter *Canada* which, skippered by Aemilius Jarvis of RYC, met and defeated the *Vencedor* of Lincoln Park Yacht Club, Chicago in 1896.

Upon their return to Toronto bearing the spoils of victory, the owners of *Canada* deeded the Cup, henceforth to bear its name, to RYC as trustees and provided that international races should be held between yachts belonging to any club affiliated with the newly formed union in classes measuring 30-to 40-feet under the Girth Rule.

### 1899

RYC won the Canada's Cup for the Chicago Yacht Club in 1899, and won it for the first time in its own name in 1903. It was not until 1954 that RYC succeeded in wresting the prize away from Rochester yachtsmen.

Chicago challenged for a match in 1899 and extensive trials were held. In each country six boats vied for the honor of sailing the Canada's Cup, and for the first time a Rochester boat represented the American yacht clubs. *Genesee*, a Hanley



## THE CANADA'S CUP

designed and built centerboarder owned by a syndicate of which Charles Van Voorhis was president, was sailed by Charles G. David.

In this initial series for the Canada's Cup, Aemilius Jarvis defended for RYC after defeating two aspirants from Toronto and three from Hamilton. Jarvis was listed as a member of syndicates that built both *Minota* and the eventual defender, *Beaver*. The series, three out of five at Toronto began on August 22, 1899 with an apparent disaster for the Canadians. Immediately after the starting gun, *Beaver* broke a spreader and was forced to retire. *Genesee*, as required, continued to sail the course but *Beaver* was given a reprieve when haze made it impossible for *Genesee* to find the weather mark.

The first race was resailed the next day. In shifting winds of varying strengths, the lead changed hands several times but *Genesee* was ahead by one minute 22 seconds at the finish line.

1896 - Fred S. Todd,  
Commodore

1897, 1899, 1900 -  
Alfred G. Wright,  
Commodore

1898- Frank E.  
Woodworth, Commodore

The second race, a light-air windward leeward course, saw a maneuver by *Genesee's* skipper David that is safe to say is as unusual now as it was then. Jarvis described the sequence with *Genesee* slightly ahead after a downwind luffing match initiated by *Beaver*:

*When nearing the finish line, the Beaver again made an attempt to luff the Genesee off, and this time it looked as if the maneuver was going to be successful. Beaver jibed her boom over to port, and headed for the lee end of the line...(intending to force) Genesee to jibe close to the line; when her way was off. Beaver would jibe back again and, as she had never taken her spinnaker in (sailing by the lee), she would have more way and might have won on the line. But the Genesee's skipper, seeing his rival's object, promptly had the turnbuckles on the main rigging unscrewed. This allowed him to let his main boom go right forward and, at the same time hauling his spinnaker boom aft, successfully staving off Beaver's maneuver and brought the Genesee over the line with a short lead of 39 seconds.*

The third race, and the match, was decided when *Genesee* carried a favorable shift to the finish more than 10 minutes ahead of *Beaver*. "The *Genesee* it must be remembered," Jarvis continued, "was sailing under the colors of the Chicago Yacht Club though she was owned by a company composed of Rochester Yacht Club members." Thus the Canada's Cup went not to Rochester but to Chicago.

## THE POWER FLEET

The history of powerboats was first recorded when RYC was re-organized in 1877. At that time the yachts numbered 23 of which 15 were sailboats and eight were steam or naphtha driven.

## TROPHIES

When two yachts under sail are within sight of each other, it is assumed they are racing.

Early in the Club's history trophies were decided to honor the winners.

## Moliers Prize Cup

In 1888, the Wolters brothers presented the Moliers Prize Cup which was won by the yacht *Madge*, whose owners presented it to RYC to be awarded annually to the yacht making the best record in all competition. The Madge Cup is still the premier Club fixture.

## Fischer Cup

The oldest trophy at RYC is the Fischer Cup from 1874. It was first sailed for on the Atlantic Coast and was won by *Cora* whose owner brought it to Detroit. A.J. Fischer later presented it to the Chicago Yacht Club. It became a challenge cup on the Great Lakes and was last won by RYC in 1927. It is now presented to the Division II season champion.

## Wright Cup

Commodore Alfred G. Wright offered the Wright Cup as a challenge cup in 1899. In the 1990s this classic cup was rededicated to be given, when appropriate, to a RYC member who gains significant recognition, as determined by the Board of Directors.