

A Beacon of Tradition: The Building of the Grosse Pointe Yacht Club

by James P. Gallagher

*In this article James P. Gallagher tells the story of the Grosse Pointe Yacht Club
and the building of its magnificent 187-foot tower.*

SINCE 1929, SAILORS on Lake St. Clair and motorists on Lakeshore Drive have used the 187-foot tower of the Grosse Pointe Yacht Club as a navigation point. On clear days, it is visible from half way out into the lake and from Anchor Bay down to the mouth of the Detroit River. It was not always thus. An Indian, or a French voyageur, paddling a canoe north or south on the lake before the latter decades of the nineteenth century would have seen an essentially featureless shoreline from Gaukler Point all the way to Grosse Pointe. The shoreline was broken by no rivers or creeks or bays; it had only the most modest hills rising from the flat waterline; the only buildings were small farmhouses of French families who owned the strip farms that ran from the lake to a line approximately where Harper Avenue is today. A clump of tall trees or (after 1899) the belfry of St. Paul's Church would have been the only clues to location between the Detroit River and the St. Clair flats and Anchor Bay.

These early travelers were well respectful of the power of Lake St. Clair to kick up winds and waves that would be catastrophic to their heavily-laden canoes. When weather threatened, they often used a safer short-cut near Gaukler Point through the Milk River, a shallow stream that made its way into a swamp well back from the lake. Through this swamp,

the Milk River connected with the Fox Creek, which ran southwest until it eventually brought the canoes back into the safety of the Detroit River at today's Alter Road.

Not that the intersection of Vernier Road and Lake St. Clair was uncharted wilderness. Since the early 1800s, the land there had been part of the 400-acre Vernier farm, Private Claim 156, granted and confirmed by the United States Commissioners to Jean Baptiste La Douceur, dit Vernier. It was one of numerous ribbon farms settled by French families after the United States won its independence from England. To provide each farmer with access to the river, the fastest and best highway to and from markets, the grants were narrow (from 162 feet to 600 feet wide), but deep (about three miles). Along the shore was a well-worn Indian trail used for centuries for movement between a famous salt spring near the mouth of the Clinton River and the various villages along the Detroit River. The Huron Indians' name for this beautiful lake of fresh water and abundant fish was Oksiketa, meaning sugar or salt, probably a reference to the salt springs at the lake's northwest corner.

Homestead farming was evidently not much more profitable or exciting than it is today, and in 1888, John Vernier opened a roadhouse along the shore road on his property, catering to travelers moving north or south along the lake,

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or to venturesome Detroiters out for a day in the country. He was noted for serving chicken, fish, and frog leg dinners. In 1895, John Vernier sold the roadhouse to his cousin, Edmund C. Vernier, who was born on the family property on February 16, 1867, and lived there until his death in 1934. Edmund was one of the best-known pillars of the community, serving as township clerk, treasurer and supervisor for many years.

Shortly after he bought the business, Ed Vernier built a more pretentious place on the inland (west) side of Lakeshore, just south (toward Detroit) of Vernier Road. A history of the time says that the inn was celebrated for the hospitality of host Edmund Vernier, and was one of the most popular summer resorts of the Gay Nineties. This roadhouse, popular with both Detroiters and with the growing number of Grosse Pointe's summer resort community, lasted until 1915, when the Verniers built still another place, farther west of Lakeshore.

Fish, chicken and frog leg dinners were not to be the only claim to popularity or recreation for the Vernier/Lakeshore site. In the 1800s, none of the relatively warm wastewater poured into the lake from thousands of homes and businesses that today stretch back from the lake, and there was none of the chemical outflow from the St. Clair River and the industrial complexes near Port Huron and Sarnia. As a result, the lake froze almost from shore to shore during normal winters. This huge sheet of ice was used for the popular sport of ice-boating, and about 1910, Frank Verheyden organized the Grosse Pointe Ice Boat Club, which held regular races throughout the winter, on a course as long as seven miles in one direction. A long pier was built out into the lake at the Vernier intersection, and the ice boat crews would come in from their races, tie up to the pier, and indulge in food and refreshments at the roadhouse.

According to the Works Projects Administration-sponsored history of the Grosse Pointes, written in the 1930s, by 1918, the original Grosse Pointe Ice Boat Club was taken over by about two dozen men, who formed another organization that "was to form the nucleus of the Grosse Pointe

Yacht Club." Since this date coincided almost exactly with the passage of the 18th Amendment (prohibition of liquor sales), the reader can draw whatever conclusion he or she wishes about the demise of the ice boating club and the rise of the yachting club!

The early 1920s are very murky concerning the GPYC, but we do know that the first emphasis remained on ice boating, rather than sailing, because the earliest minutes of the Club are devoted to acknowledging the winners of the ice boating races, and the prizes that they won. Rewards were not exactly generous by today's standards of athletic recompense. They included such items as a pair of leather gloves, or buckskin mittens, and a fancy sweater coat.

During the early 1920s, the Club membership was growing. The Grosse Pointes were slowly changing from a summer resort for wealthy Detroit businessmen and professionals and their families to a community of permanent year-round homes of the leading families of Detroit's booming automobile industry, plus many bankers and mercantile leaders. With that growth came an interest in the construction of a permanent clubhouse, a venture that fortunately was wholeheartedly supported by the municipal fathers of Grosse Pointe Shores, who had jurisdiction over the site. This support has continued until today. The building committee hoped for, and got, a lease of the outer end of the municipal pier, and Grosse Pointe

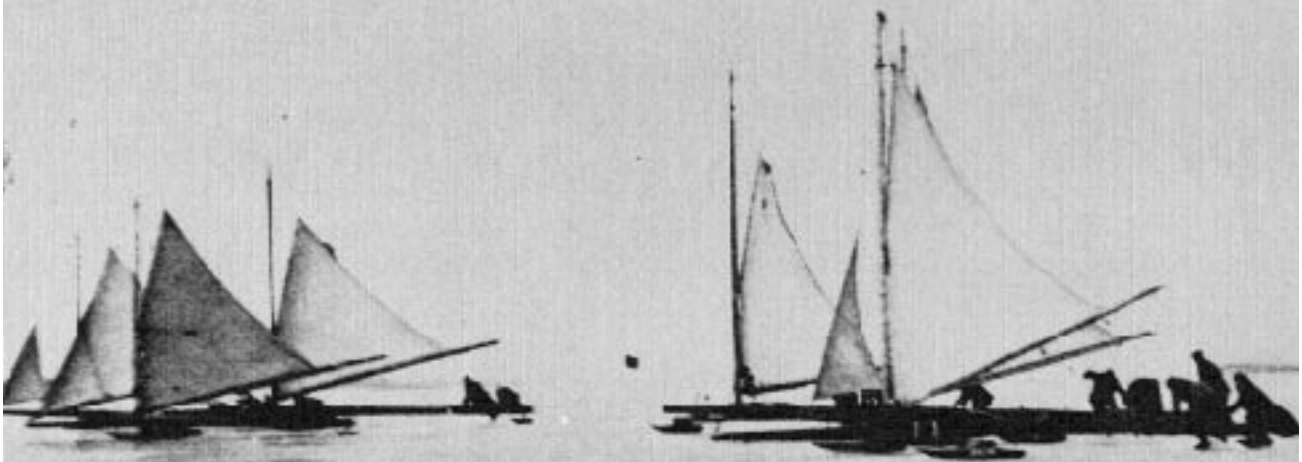
Shores Supervisor George Osius welcomed the club and its plans. Not coincidentally, he was later honored by the naming of the lakeshore park after him. The boulder that bears the park's bronze plaque was taken from the shore where the GPYC now stands.

By 1926, the building committee was ready for serious planning, and one of its first happy duties was the acceptance of an offer by member Clarence L. Ayres of a parcel of land at the southwest corner of Lakeshore Road and Vernier, including the lake frontage and the associated riparian rights, for a total price of \$28,000, to be paid as the Club found it possible to do so. Ayres realized that the Club did not have the means to buy the property, so when the land came on the



An architectural rendering of the club from the firm of architect Guy Lowell.

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Ice-boating on Lake St. Clair.

Ice-boating was the real origin of the Grosse Pointe Yacht Club, as pictured here in this early 1900s photograph on Lake St. Clair.

market, he bought it with a clubhouse in mind, and transferred it to the Club at exactly his purchase price. At the same time, after negotiations with the Village, the Club leased the adjoining land, consisting of 90 feet along the lake, and 325 feet back from the shoreline.

Edsel B. Ford was named Commodore of the rapidly growing Club, and the Village granted the lease for 30 years (it was renewed in 1956, and again in 1986). In accepting the lease, the Club agreed to build a seawall on three sides of the property and to construct a clubhouse within the next two years, at a cost "not less than \$50,000," a schedule and a budget that were to prove woefully inadequate.

1926 was a heady year in the United States and in Grosse Pointe. Members of the GPYC laid plans for the design and building of a clubhouse that would be grander than anything along the lake, one that would compare favorably with the two older clubs on Belle Isle in Detroit (the Detroit Boat Club and the Detroit Yacht Club), and one that would befit the social and financial prestige of the members. To finance the building and grounds, the plan called for membership contributions of \$225,000, plus an additional \$100,000 to be raised through the issuance of bonds. This sum was considered ample, because the land improvements and the clubhouse were budgeted at \$200,000, a figure that rapidly became a wishful chimera, thus conforming to the adage that all building projects, back to the Pyramids and forward to the Renaissance Center, will always be over budget and behind schedule.

In August of 1926, the bids were opened for the construction of a seawall and for the area behind it to be filled approximately 1,300 feet to the front of the present Village dock. The contract for the seawall was given to the A. J. Dupuis Company, and a second contract was awarded to the

Liberty Construction Company for the fill and grading of the Club site. Unfortunately, the Liberty firm was unable or unwilling to do the work as contracted for the agreed price and schedule, so the contract was forfeited in July of 1927, and awarded to another firm, Dunbar-Sullivan Company, for the price of 90¢ per cubic yard of fill. No record is available as to where this huge amount of earth came from, but it is safe to guess that the bulk of it was provided by the enormous amount of excavation carried out from major downtown Detroit buildings that were being constructed during these years, like the Union Guardian and the Penobscot Buildings.

Another addition to the property was made in January, 1927, when the Bayer family agreed to sell the land immediately to the south (toward Detroit), which included a house, the lake frontage, and the riparian rights. Another example of the generosity of Club members: John T. Hurley bought the property for the Club, but refused any commission for his services. The examples of Clarence Ayres and John Hurley have been repeated over and over by others during the Club's history.

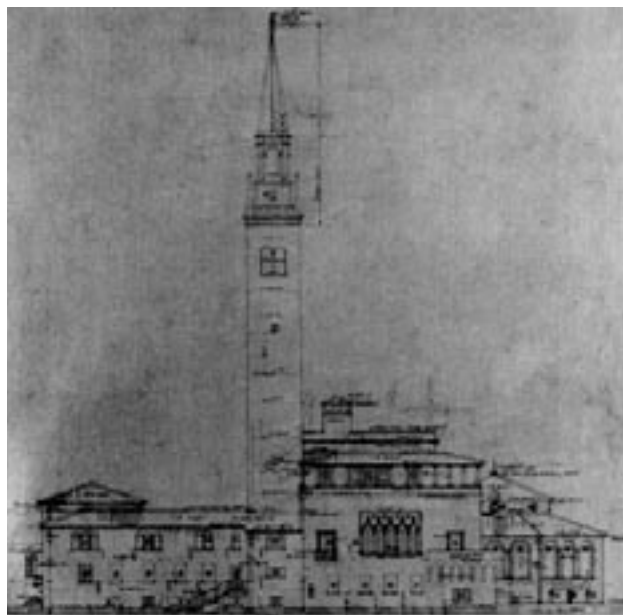
At the same January, 1927, meeting, an architect for the Club is first mentioned. The name suggested to the Board was that of Guy Lowell, FAIA, of Boston, Massachusetts, who was a graduate of Harvard College, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts of Paris. Lowell was a first cousin of poet James Russell Lowell, who was also an essayist and diplomat. Not mentioned in the minutes, but undoubtedly significant to his credentials, was his reputation as a leading yachtsman on the Atlantic Coast. A blue-water sailor, Lowell had won the International Regatta at Kiel, Germany, with his boat Cima, and he had been a member of the U. S. sailing team at Barcelona, Spain.

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Lowell had been interviewed by a committee consisting of then Commodore John H. French, George Hilsendegen, and Clarence Ayres. They were favorably impressed by his membership in the Eastern Yacht Club of Massachusetts, the oldest yacht club in the U.S. On a professional level, they liked his designs of the Piping Rock Club at Locust Valley, Long Island, New York, the New York County Courthouse in Manhattan, and country homes for such wealthy families as C. K. G. Billings, Clarence H. Mackey, and Harry Payne Whitney. Interestingly, there is no mention of consideration given to such local architectural giants as Albert Kahn (designer of the Detroit Athletic Club and the Grosse Pointe Shores Village Hall, across Lakeshore Drive from the Club) and Smith, Hinchman & Grylls (who were responsible for the University Club and the Players' Club).

The financial arrangement with Mr. Lowell for his professional services was that he was to receive a fee of 7½% of the cost of the clubhouse construction, plus a \$50 monthly salary for a clerk of the works (the architect's representative at the job site). There were several escape clauses for the Club, however; if the Club was not satisfied with the conceptual sketches and floor plans submitted, they could negate the contract upon the payment of a fee of 1½% of the estimated cost. If the architect provided completed plans and specifications, and the building was then not built, the architect would receive a fee of 3½% of estimated cost for his effort.

Here we run across a mystery and a correction of a historical error. Although Guy Lowell has been credited as the architect of the Club for the past 60 years, it is impossible that he provided any services beyond whatever rough sketches he submitted to the interviewing committee, and whatever limited discussions he may have had with his asso-



A 1929 Architectural Plan.

From a 1929 Pencilpoints architectural magazine, this plan shows the Club's south elevation.

ciates in Boston before the awarding of the commission. The calendar itself provides proof of this. On January 17, 1927, Mr. Lowell was engaged as the architect by the vote of the Board. Just 18 days later, on February 4, 1927, he died in the Spanish Madeira Islands, in the Atlantic Ocean off the northwest coast of Africa. Given the state of transportation in 1927 (a trans-Atlantic liner to Liverpool or Cherbourg, then some sort of smaller vessel to Madeira), it seems clear that almost all of the work after the committee interviewed Mr. Lowell was done by his senior associates. Ralph Coolidge Henry and Henry P. Richmond took over Lowell's work and became the architectural firm of Henry and Richmond, and all subsequent dealings were with these men.

The architects immediately noted the single outstanding characteristic of the site: "its apparently limitless extent of water surface, almost equally limitless and level terrain, and a rich vegetation." Given this, the designers sought an element of "Contrasting verticality in a region where all else is horizontal." Since both Lowell and Henry and Richmond were considering Venice as a prototype, their first thought was of a campanile, or bell tower, especially one of slender proportions and significant height.

Some months after the completion of the Club, Mr. Henry wrote in an article for the architectural magazine *Pencilpoints*, that "the entire building (is given) a lighter and gayer atmosphere than typifies the more solidly mysterious prototypes of Venetian Romanesque and Gothic." Reflecting on the campanile, he mused "why not a large bell in the lantern to strike the hours and half-hours of the dial-less ship's



Oldest GPYC Membership Card.

The oldest Grosse Pointe Yacht Club membership card known in existence is that of one-time member Ignatius Backman, signed by then Treasurer William C. Roney in 1914. It was about that time that the Grosse Pointe Yacht Club was transformed from an ice-boating club to a yachting club.

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clock; why not one with a modem aviation beacon at its apex?"

Anyone who assumes that the problems are over once the design has been approved and the architect engaged has never been involved in the building of anything larger than a doghouse. In June, 1927, the architects submitted floor plans to the Board, which approved them with only minor revisions, and they were ordered to prepare finished working drawings and specifications for bidding. Only one month later, Board minutes give the first hints that maybe—just maybe—the membership assessments would not be enough to cover the costs. These hints were borne out in October, when the bids came in at more than double the estimates. Instructions were given to the architects to scale back the design to get costs down to \$350,000 (no more mention of the original \$200,000!). This could well have been where the original north wing locker room and ladies' guest rooms were cut from the design. Back to the drawing board. In February 1928, the revised bids were opened, with the low bidder being Corrick Brothers Company, who offered a price of \$380,000, plus a \$20,000 fee. The same minutes mention, by name, architects Henry and Richmond, noting the first payment of architectural fees for \$35,000.

Rising costs or not, construction was underway, and the harbor was opened for use in June 1928, giving boaters a gull's-eye view of the club that would be ready for their pleasure a year later. The outer harbor, 450 feet by 550 feet, is one of the largest protected harbors for small boats on Lake St. Clair. The inner harbor was shared with the village of Grosse Pointe Shores. The footings of the seawalls and of the yacht club building itself are white oak piles with concrete cappings.

Fittingly, it was the Fourth of July, 1929, always one of the traditionally great holidays on the water, that was selected for the grand opening of the Grosse Pointe Yacht Club. In June, invitations went out to the membership and to selected guests. It was to be a lavish social occasion, and the Detroit newspapers devoted pages of text and pictures to the event. Capping more than three years of work and fundraising by the officers, Board, and members, what had originally

been nothing more than a long wooden pier for ice boaters had finally been transformed into a landscaped peninsula, crowned with one of the finest private clubs in the country. Those first-day guests saw almost exactly what today's members see each time they turn off Lakeshore Road, with only the slight modifications that have been made in the landscaping, car parking, and some outdoor activity areas. Approaching up the long driveway, cars swung around the traffic circle to the main entrance in the north wing of what is essentially a U-shaped structure that faces west to the entrance drive and east to Lake St. Clair, and features an Italianate garden in the hollow of the U.

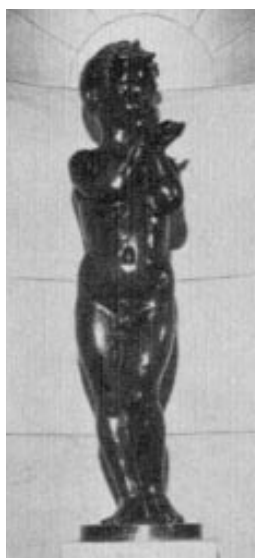
The building itself is covered with a rough-troweled, warm-colored stucco, applied over walls of hollow terra cotta tile.

All architectural trim is of stone, and the roof is a variegated, red-brown clay tile. Every actor and actress knows that entrance is everything. The clubhouse itself, from the moment one enters the front door, is designed to make the maximum impression on the visitor. The broad, straight entrance foyer is 50 feet long, providing the setting for the most leisurely, or more stately entrance. This foyer culminates in a 35-foot diameter Rotunda, the essential arrival point from which all other interior destinations are reached.

If the destination is the Main Clubroom (Ballroom), there is a broad stairway leading to it from the Rotunda. Any evening-gown-clad lady can rise like Venus from the sea, each step making her more visible to all in the

Ballroom. If dining is the order of the evening, the Rotunda leads directly into the octagon-shaped Main Dining Room, with its colonnaded central area. The room is positioned so that five of its sides have an unobstructed view of the water.

The Main Clubroom, which is the dominating mass of the building, is 86 feet long, 44 feet wide, and 29 feet high, with seven arched French windows leading to an open loggia (long since converted to the closed-in Binnacle). On the opposite wall are three high Gothic bays overlooking the Italian garden courtyard. The floor is polished oak for dancing, and the ceiling is timbered with girders, beams, and decorated plaster caissons. The focal point of the room is the Kadota-stone trimmed fireplace, crowned with a huge (10-foot x 29-



Bronze Statues East Wind and West Wind.

These are two of three bronze statues donated by Clarence Ayres, little more than one year after the Club's formal 1929 Grand Opening.

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Italian-styled Veranda.

The spacious Italian-styled veranda of the 1929 Grosse Pointe Yacht Club offered fresh air and fresh breezes from Lake St. Clair. The Veranda has since been enclosed, remodeled and renamed the Binnacle – the Club's lakeside dining area.



Club Main Ball Room.

Conversational groupings of overstuffed furniture and rich oriental rugs reflect the decor of the late 1920s, early 1930s era. The original chandelier, as seen in this early photograph of the Club Main Ball Room, still hangs in the same place today. The photo was taken shortly after Commodore John H. French donated the massive 10-foot x 29-foot marine painting of the Sea Witch.

foot) painting of three sailing ships pictured under full sail in an 1851 race from New York City around Cape Horn to San Francisco. This painting was a gift from Commodore John H. French on the occasion of the Club's opening in 1929, with the stipulation that it hang in this place of honor, a request that has been granted for almost seventy years.

The Dining Room is one of the most cheerful large rooms ever designed, with east and north light flooding into the

perimeter of the room, and with additional light tunneled into the center of the room through the round windows of the vaulted clerestory above. The central area is surrounded by marble columns, and was originally intended as a dance floor for the dining tables that surround it. Originally planned for the seating of 250 dinner guests, the dining room is directly connected to the kitchen and serving areas, which have been completely renovated, enlarged, and re-

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The Rotunda (above).

The Rotunda is the central point of the Club, leading directly upstairs to the Ball Room, or to the Main Dining Room. Directly ahead are doors which lead to the East lawn.



Main Dining Room (right).



Smaller Dining Room, 1929.

“The more things change, the more they stay the same,” the saying goes. A perfect example of this is found when comparing the Club’s smaller dining room, now called the Spinnaker, as it was in 1929 (above), and the redecorated 1986 Spinnaker (opposite page). Although the present decor is a more luxurious and elegant setting, the furnishings almost duplicate the original ones.

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The Spinnaker Room, 1986.

equipped in 1986 as part of the North Wing project.

At the west end of the kitchen is what was originally designed as a men's grill, an informal eating room that has evolved into the very popular Spinnaker Room, complete with bar, a casual counterpoint to the formality of the Main Dining Room.

By anyone's standards, the new Club was luxurious, but all the luxury was not without a price. By the early fall of 1929, just before the stock market took its Black Tuesday crash in October, the total of the loans taken out by the Club for the construction project reached \$740,000, including fees to the builder of \$458,757, more than half again the agreed-upon cost back in the optimistic, heady days of 1928. Although this debt might well have been manageable a few years earlier, the Club and its members had to carry this burden into the Great Depression, when overnight the financially solid membership became very unsolid, indeed.

The minutes of Board meetings during the first half of the 1930s are a saga of incredible effort and sacrifice on the part of the officers, Board, and members to keep the Club afloat. The primary duty of the monthly board meetings seemed to be accepting the resignations of members who could no longer afford the dues, let alone the special assessments and pleas for the purchase of bonds (at 6% interest, payable in gold). Somewhere in Grosse Pointe, perhaps papering the walls of a recreation room, there must be hundreds of these bonds, purchased in the hope that the Club could meet its obligations

as well as keep up its services to members. Requirements for membership were broadened and re-broadened. Initiation fees were reduced again and again, and new categories of membership were established in the hope of attracting solvent initiates who could pay monthly dues and use the income-producing services of the Club.

But all was in vain, and the mortgages on the Club were foreclosed by banks that were themselves insolvent, the debt carried hopefully on the books as assets. The ownership of the Club passed from the members to their creditors, not to be regained until a new group of officers, optimistic about the economic climb back out of the depression and the following recession, bought back from the creditors the control and operation of the new Grosse Pointe Yacht Club.

The gearing up of the nation for World War II, and the growing confidence of thousands of families moving into middle and upper-middle income brackets was the new base for the re-born Grosse Pointe Yacht Club. The sport of boating broadened its base among many Americans who heretofore thought of a boat only as something to be rowed or fished from. In a sense, the extension of both yachting and club membership to vast new segments of the population is what put the Club on the solid financial and social foundation it enjoys today.

But construction and maintenance had to be continued because of the changing needs of the membership for services and the vicissitudes of both high and low water on a site

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The Grosse Pointe Yacht Club.
The club today, from a painting by member-artist Paul Gillan.

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carved out of the lake bottom. Bowling alleys were installed on the lower level, the South Harbor was created, and the entire site had to be sheet piled against the intrusion of the lake during high water. In 1963, the tide had turned, literally, and the low level of the lake demanded the dredging of the harbors to provide the depth that the larger boats needed.

As early as 1984, the Board decided that the time had come to bring the Club to the highest standards of food service. The 1929 kitchen and serving area could no longer provide the level of service demanded by the quadrupled membership. So many dinners, so many receptions, so many banquets, so many lunches had passed through these areas that the time had come to renovate and upgrade the equipment and facilities.

Charles Terrence McCafferty & Associates were selected as architects for the million dollar improvement. They were asked to determine how the future requirements of the Club would be met within the constraints imposed by the existing Club facility. There was never any intention of tearing the place down and replacing it with Golden Arches or adding aluminum siding! The architects found immediately that the original construction documents were no longer available. The firm of Henry and Richmond had long ago gone out of business, and the successor firms had no idea what had happened to the plans.

This meant that before any new plans could be drawn, the McCafferty firm had to make detailed drawings of existing conditions as a first step in planning the renovation. Luckily, they had the complete and knowledgeable cooperation of a Building Committee composed of John Boll, Ted Smith, and Fred Schriever, who met regularly with the architect. When plans were ready, and bids accepted, the construction of what was called the North Wing Project was awarded to the firm of Edward V. Monahan, Inc.

The contract was a rigid one. Unlike the original construction that dragged out over several years, the schedule demanded that work start only after the close of the Club on January 3, 1986, and that it must be completed in time for the traditional Easter Brunch of March 30, 1986. Although there was the smoothest cooperation among the contractors and the various sub-contractors, the architect's office, and the Building Committee, the schedule was met only through the happy and unexpected blessing of Mother Nature, who provided a mild winter and temperate weather for those three months.

What was accomplished in the 90 days? The kitchen was more than doubled in size, new and more efficient equipment was installed, the basement area serving the kitchen was enlarged and improved, and the service courtyard was made much more usable, principally through the installation of an elevator to service the kitchen. Also, the popular

Spinnaker Room was expanded, remodeled and completely redecorated. The focal point of the Club, the entrance foyer and Rotunda, was brightened and refurbished.

Like any tried and proven recipe, changes to the Club since 1929 have been made slowly and thoughtfully. Although the functional ability of the Club has been improved and modernized, it remains essentially the same Club that members saw on July 4, 1929, as they drove up the long driveway from Lakeshore Road. This architectural jewel remains a memorial to all those members and officers who sacrificed so much time, effort, and money to shape its character and stature. The heritage is here, in this special place on the shores of Lake St. Clair, and it will continue to be the symbol of excellence that is so cherished by its members.

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