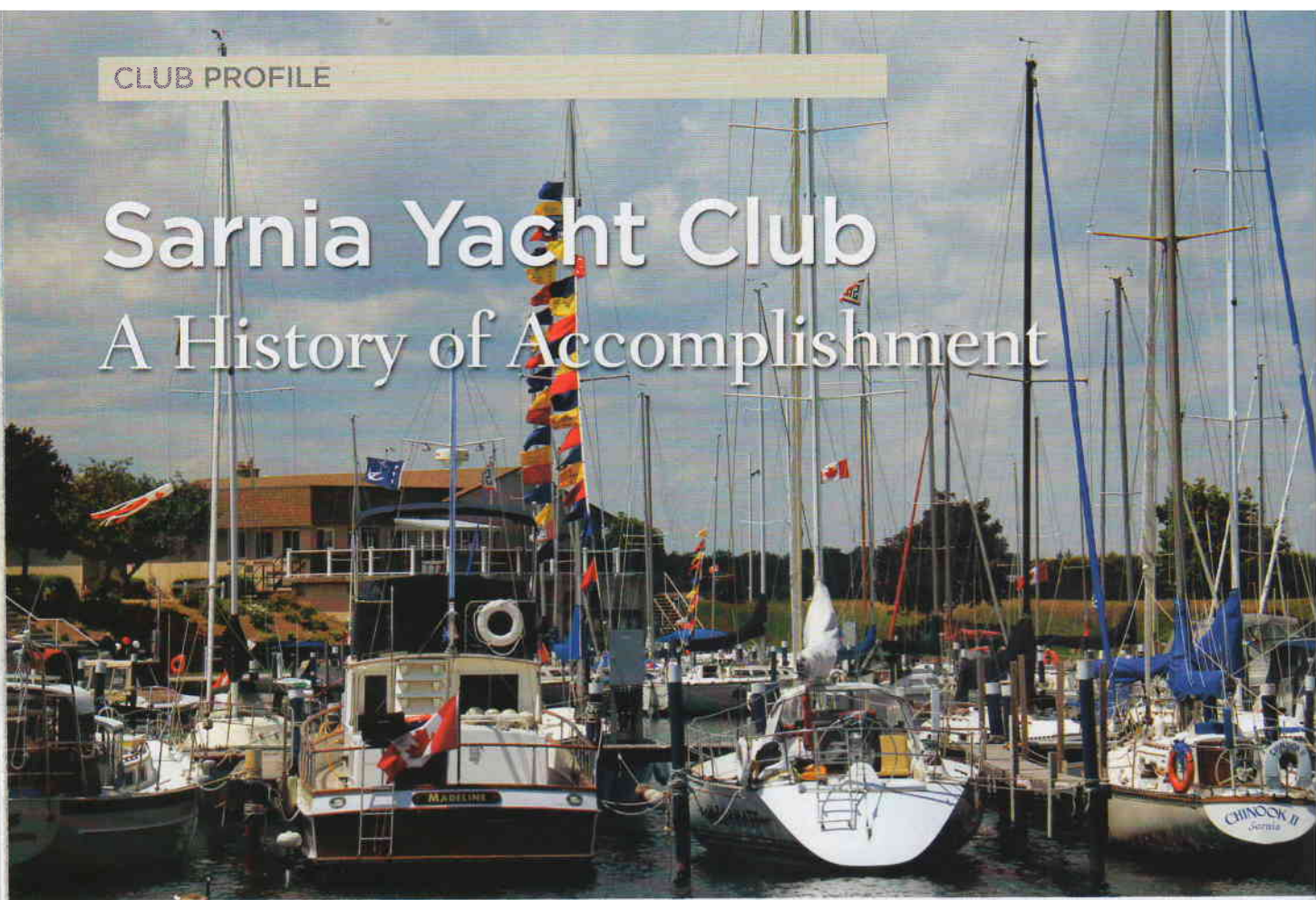


# Sarnia Yacht Club

## A History of Accomplishment



Clubhouse looking NW across the basin.

By Katherine Stone

Photos courtesy of Sarnia Yacht Club

**T**he Three Fires Confederacy (Potawatami, Ottawa, and Ojibwa Clans) welcomed La Salle in 1679 when he sailed into Lake Huron. Already established as the Hub of the Great Lakes, they helped to create a center of trade and culture with the French in the village of "The Rapids" after the War of 1812. By 1836 the town was renamed Port Sarnia and incorporated in 1856. With the natural wealth of abundant timber, the discovery of oil, and the arrival of the Great Western and Grand Trunk Railways, Port Sarnia grew to become the City of Sarnia at the beginning of WWI. It was now a significant trans-shipment port for western grain and, with the establishment of the Polymer Corporation to manufacture synthetic rubber during WWII, it was now a major petrochemical centre.

Located on the eastern shore of Lake Huron, at its most southern point, the Blue Water Bridge links Sarnia with Port Huron, Michigan and spans the St. Clair River which connects Lake Huron and Lake St. Clair, both ideal areas for water enthusiasts. Although we're talking SOUTHERN Ontario, it's still Canada, so you can be sure that in 1910 "Old Man Winter's best efforts did not deter these hard water sailors from racing and attracting fans from both sides of the water [ice]. Betting was commonplace, with wagers posted as high as \$200." Well, you had to have something to do in the winter!

From the SYC publication "A History of Accomplishment",

we now see the beginnings of the Sarnia Yacht Club, founded in 1930, where the 115 members built docks and used the old tennis building from the City Parks Department at the end of London Road in Sarnia Bay for their first location. But by 1932 they were forced to move again, leasing land from the Dominion Salt Company at the end of Exmouth Street. The enterprising members again built new docks and refurbished a donated clubhouse.



SYC Basin June 1955 from Sarnia Observer.



SYC aerial picture taken in 2013 - with fine view of Blue Water Bridge.

Not to get too complacent, when the Salt Company decided not to renew their lease, another move put them up-river on Lake Huron at Point Edward in 1956, with a long-term lease from the Federal Government. These Do-it-Yourselfers were not deterred and with thousands of membership hours they again built the docks and put up the buildings on what was to become their (today's) permanent location. The original charter declared them to be, "An aquatic and social organization consisting of sailors, cruisers, outboards, canoeists, racing shells and swimmers principally to encourage boat racing and

all aquatic sport and to subscribe to and cooperate with other associations with similar objectives." True to their original charter, members of the SYC joined with other enthusiastic boaters in Windsor and London to create the original "Canadian Power Squadron" in 1941.

There was just one little hitch; in order to access the lake, the club had to carry out an excavation/dredging operation to open a channel that would allow the passage of members' boats. The first boats to enter and pass through the new channel did so in a blinding snowstorm in late October! Being resourceful members, they scrounged, borrowed, and accepted donated material that would often arrive unannounced, so no questions were asked, to complete new docks and buildings for members in 1958. The move was well worth it, as membership numbers shot up to 240. Efforts would continue for another 40 years to build up the north shore to stop the constant harbour entrance silting and lake surges.

Through all this time there was never an official clubhouse. Members raised the idea again in 1973 and poured a 40 x 60 concrete slab. To appease members that didn't want a building with a million dollar view of Lake Huron, they referred to it as the "shelter". Five years later with more rooms, a kitchen, bar and lounge, the "shelter" finally had to be called a clubhouse!

From the beginning, the Sea Scouts worked in conjunction with SYC to offer youth sailing training programs. By the early



Jr. Sailors carrying placards of participating nations at 1985 Soling World Championships.



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1984 SYC boats at Bay Finn Anchorage.

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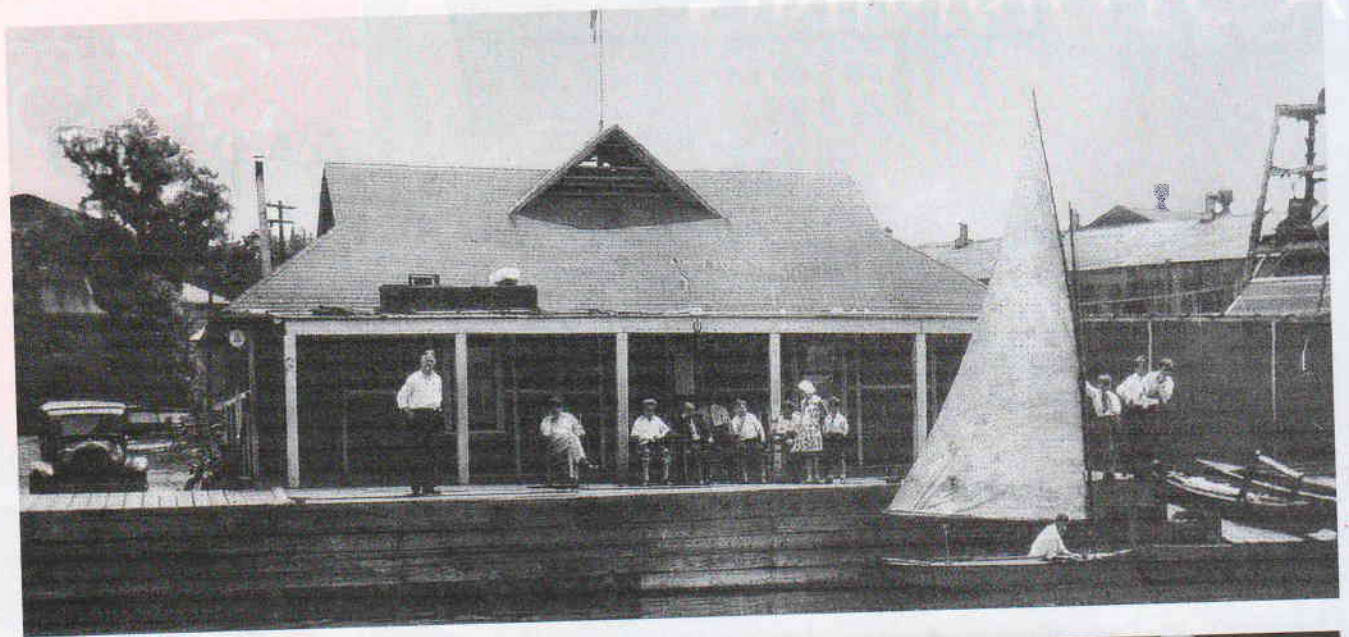
1950s the club was ready to start their own program with 5 new prams. This was followed by Blue Jays, 470s, Albacores, Optimists, Abbott A11s and Flying Juniors. SYC received the Jack Sutton Award in 1990 and 1991 for having the best DRYA (Detroit River Yachting Association) Junior Sailing Program. Quite a nice accomplishment for the "Do-it-Yourselfers."

Soon one unexpected event after another seemed to arrive on the club's doorstep. Following a series of rent increases, SYC was able to purchase the property in 1987. Then, after being hammered by a series of winter storms, flooding from high lake levels, and then the Blizzard of 1987: a long-term project of raising the seawalls was started in 1988, so the members could enjoy feeling dry when they boarded their boats. Added to this were a new bubbling system & a pile design that now keeps most of the spiles in place during the winter. This work, for the most part, was completed by Club members, funded through raising funds from within the Club, and by a debenture from each member.

Sailboat racing became a going concern by 1959. Joining forces with the Port Huron Club, they co-sponsored the first international racing program in North America. Now enter into the picture, Bill Abbott, a.k.a. the "Chief", having acquired a reputation for building quality boats, built the first Abbott Folkboat in Canada to add to the growing fleet at SYC. The fleet finally convinced him to helm one of the folkboats in a club race and much to the disbelief of the fleet as well as himself, he won



Taz racing in basin. Tazes are a junior sailing boat (a young jr. regatta is run in the basin while Sailfest takes place out in the lake).



Old Tennis Building at foot of London Road on River.

Photo by Roy Bell

the race! He was smitten and the "racing thing" became the start of the Abbott dynasty of sailing champions.

The Abbott's second production boat was the Soling. The plugs arrived in 1967 and 6 boats were produced that year. He soon turned over the helm to Billy Jr, who with his wife, Joanne, and Brad Boston, sailed in the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta. Joanne was the first woman to sail in the Olympics in a Soling and enjoyed wearing her t-shirt emblazoned with "It takes a woman to do a middleman's job." In the 1930s SYC was not different than any other club, as sailing was a man's sport. Women gained full membership at SYC by the late 1960s, and several went on to become competent in race management.

Becoming confident with their race officials and volunteers, SYC hosted their first major regatta inviting Solings from all over the Great Lakes in 1971. The SYC/PHYC racing program was in full swing, now attracting some 145 registered boats. By 1985 they felt they could handle the challenge of hosting the World Soling Championships. Putting Sarnia on the international sailing stage, they hosted 117 competitors from 12 countries over the 10-day extremely successful event.

Their signature event is now Sailfest, part of Ontario Sailing's Grand Prix Development Regattas for Youth sailors. Since 2000, under the original chairmanship of Joanne Abbott and PRO Jim Kern, Sailfest won a CYA (Canadian Yachting Association) award for the best managed regatta in 2005.

Since 1925, the start of the 400 km Mackinac Race from Port Huron to Mackinac Island starts just 5 miles north of SYC. With over 3,000 sailors involved, it is definitely the highlight of the season for Lake Huron and Lake Michigan sailboats.

Sarnia not only has great racing and sail training programs, but the best cruising locations ever! Next to the world's finest wilderness cruising areas of northern Lake Huron, the thrill of entering unfamiliar harbours and anchoring in distant locations is an unparalleled adrenaline rush.



Bill Jr., Joanne Abbott, Brad Boston at 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games Opening Ceremony.

Now with 380 full and 200 associate members, the basin is filled with 350 wet slips and all the amenities of other boating clubs. The use of cranes to launch and haul-out boats has been replaced with a travel lift that works in conjunction with a hydraulic trailer, using machine operators and crew trained from within the Club. In the last ten years, there have been new seawalls, paving, dock surfaces, building refurbishments, and security improvements to name only a few of the progressive upgrades.

This truly members' club, where a majority of the jobs are done by the members, has created a wonderful sense of community at this special place called Sarnia Yacht Club. \*

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