

ICFC History

By Bob Reigeluth

Observing the centennial of the Iron City Fishing Club is like being an oarsman. He moves forward and yet looks back at where he has been.

In the past century, ICFC has moved through pivotal times. In fact, ever since Jerry Monague showed the way from Go Home Bay to Sandy Beach in 1900 and the Dining Hall was built two years later, there have been a succession of turning points.

To touch on them all would take the kind of bound volume that has already been written. Nonetheless, there are a few that should be looked upon at the 2000-01 centennial because they were the beginning of the kind of tradition that serves as the club's foundation, or of a modernization without which the club could not have successfully taken itself into the next century.

Any establishment on a lake - particularly one of the Great Lakes - is at the mercy of "lake effect" storms. ICFC's fortunes have turned on a few of these.

For instance, the three-day blow that tried to pick up eight tents and drop them on Gravenhurst in 1923 hastened the construction of wooden cottages. Within the next 30 years, all of the tents and tent platforms had gone, except for the Applegate/Reigeluth tent which to this day serves as a trip back through time ... and a place to stay.

In 1951, a number of campers had to "upgrade" their roofs thanks to the Great Hailstorm in early July.

Then there was the dark badass twister that dipped down near the shoreline at 7:45 a.m. on Aug. 24, 1998 - the day after camp closed. There were no injuries and, remarkably, not much structural damage. But it laid waste to trees from one end of ICFC to the other. The upshot was a significant cleanup tab and a decidedly better view of the bay.

Much of the charm of life on Georgian Bay involves leaving your car behind at marinas and arriving at encampments by boat. It used to involve leaving creature comforts, such as plumbing and electricity, behind too.

There was running water in ICFC's tents as early as 1911, but there weren't toilets in all the cottages until 1951. And the camp wasn't fully wired for electricity until 1955 - this after the cottages and boardwalk had been lit by kerosene lamps for half a century. There had actually been enough resistance to vote down wiring the camp in 1947. As it was, my grandfather - Bob Applegate - wouldn't use the electricity in his cottage for two years.

Getting away from the telephone was another perk of Iron City, so there was also considerable debate over whether or not to install a phone booth. However, in 1956 a coin box with an extension to the caretaker's house was approved. Now, you could no longer completely get away from it all.

Inevitably, time's relentless army marches on. And the result has been a diminishing of the lore of traveling to Georgian Bay.

The superb lake steamer, "The Midland City," which brought us to and from camp for 35 years, was taken out of service and scrapped in 1954.

And the trains that carried the Iron City party from Pittsburgh to Toronto, Midland, Parry Sound and Mactier and back for six decades disappeared into railroad news in 1963.

Gone was the excitement and camaraderie of gathering at the Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Station on a night in June. And the romance of feeling the wheels rumbling 'neath the floor of your Pullman compartment, while knowing you were on your way to another summer at Iron City.

More people flew or drove now, but at least you could get your car closer to camp.

The completion of Twelve-Mile Bay Road from Highway 69 to the Moose Deer Point Marina in 1964 left a half-hour boat ride to camp, as opposed to the hour and a half it used to take from Parry Sound. In 1982, Healey Lake Road was put through from Mactier to the Moon River Marina in Woods Bay. That enabled you to park and get to ICFC in 10 minutes. After dark too, if necessary.

Since this is a fishing club, much of its history features just that: Charlotte Chapple's muskies in 1932, Gail Jenkins' bass in 1992 What sets Iron City apart from other clubs on Georgian Bay, however, is its size and athletic facilities.

We've had tennis since 1904, but it became a bigger deal in 1960 when two hard-surface courts behind Rattlesnake Row replaced the single weed-strewn court near the Athletic Director's cabin, and in 1978 when two all-weather courts were added behind the ball field.

Ah, yes, the ball field. We've had one since 1912 - the year Fenway Park was built. The campers vs. staff Sunday softball games have been a tradition since then. Through the years there have also been memorable games between ICFC teams and contingents from Parry Sound, Camp Hurontario and the Indian Camp. (By the way, "Wild" Bob Heath wasn't really wild. He just liked to pitch inside.)

Horseshoes, shuffleboard, croquet and boccie have been options for 95 years, but Iron City sports took a giant step forward in 1966 when Jim Kinnear presided over the layout and maintenance of the nine hole putting green in front of the Lodge.

The weekly putting tournaments that precede the softball games mean you can become a bi-athlon person on Sundays - triathlon person if you find yourself in a canoe race in between.

The camp has been blessed in that the occasional dark times haven't resulted in tragedy. Such as the forest fire that swept from the Captain Allen Straits to Twosers Bay in 1919, the Back Boathouse fire in 1931, the explosion and fire that sank the "Iron City" in the Front Bay in 1950 and the tornado three years ago.

In fact, from the boathouse fire came a better Back Boathouse that served the club for 60 years and eventually the Old Friends Boathouse that was built and dedicated last season.

Indeed, ICFC has been a study of building and rebuilding. The Lodge, built in 1918, was renovated in 1964 and again in 1997. Today it is a first-class rec center and library. The Main Dock was rebuilt and expanded in '97. The Dining Hall and kitchen have undergone face lifts.

The 600-square-foot mold was broken with the construction of elegant cottages on Domini and Monague Islands, Garbage Hill and the point off Reed's Bridge.

Down through the years, the camp has been in the good hands of Allen and Inez Cripps - and now Gary, Florence, Maurice and Lisa Gregoire. The families did not succeed each other as Property Managers. But when the Gregoires arrived in 1990, they upheld and carried on the spirit of competence, dedication and kindness that the Crippses gave to the camp decades before.

Without them, none of the above would have been possible.

Our legacy has been that of tradition, camping, picnicking, keeping it simple, keeping modern things to a minimum. And yet when the 21st century arrived, the Iron City Fishing Club was ready.