

The Day the Boat Clubs Burnt in Edgewater, NJ

by **Frank Roy Principe**

The morning of October 31st, 1964 was a sunny, dry day, with a rising breeze from the south coming up the Hudson River, the tide was part way out exposing the deep silt. Conditions looked good for installing a new roof on the club house of the Knickerbocker Canoe Club which was on the waterfront in Edgewater, New Jersey.

As I was a member with our work party that Saturday, there were 17 members present, one half of our membership. We were 16 members on the roof, and one down below who we felt might be at the risk working on a pitched roof 35 feet above the mud, and water. The one down below was an older member named Douglas Byrd from the flats in Edgewater, a great guy. We had hauled many packages of shingles, tar paper, and other roofing materials onto the roof all brought up by hand.

The club house was a large frame building of 2-1/2 full stories with a big attic. The outside dimensions were at least 30 plus feet wide by 75 feet long with 10 foot ceiling heights, and a high attic. The building was sitting on a large wooden railroad barge about 133 feet long. The club house sat on the west portion of the barge which was situated East to West. The East portion was decked over for outside social functions with a big second floor porch covering part of it, and facing New York City, and the River.

On the first floor we had a 10 foot long entrance way outside the main building with a work room on one side, and a lady's bathroom on the other side with their access from inside the club. On entering the club, through a very heavy wood sliding door, you would see rows of canoes, mostly cedar stripped, some varnished outside, and inside. Some painted outside and varnished on the inside. One of the canoes belonged to a veteran who did not come back from World War II, but this canoe was not touched, it remained in honor of the veteran. At the east end of the building there was heavy double sliding door facing the river and the city. The whole inside was varnished wainscoating with lockers to the extreme sides along the inside. These varnished lockers had

roll up doors where most members kept their individual dishes and cooking utensils as there were copper, lined cooking areas. Between each of these vertical lockers, for a total about 36 lockers.

Up the stairs to the second floor you reached a landing with a door to the club room straight ahead was a stewards quarters to the left on the north side, and a men's locker room, shower, and toilet. The men's locker room was also all varnished wainscoating with individual clothing locker for all members. The club room had a high ceiling with much varnished wood work, deers head, antique rifles, and photographs on the walls dating back to the 1880s of club members, and activities. Also there were numerous trophies for canoe races, etc, in a display case with the biggest trophy about 3 feet tall for winning water sports regattas, in front of Edgewater residents, at the verteran's field about two blocks south of the club.

The club had been originally located at the west end of Dykeman Street in upper Manhattan on the Hudson River, but was moved to Edgewater some decades before. The original mission was to introduce young people to canoeing which involved racing, camping, with short and long distance canoeing activities.

By 1964 the club had evolved into more of a typical boat club with motor boats been the main type of boat used. We had about 18 boats on mornings during the boating season. As this was the last weekend in October, many of the boats were already hauled out of the water, and winterized, and covered with canvases at the club.

The neighbors were all boat clubs, and a marina. We had the Manhattan yacht club to the south of us a few hundred feet away. To the north we had the Fort Washington canoe club, not active at the time. The New York motorboat club which was a very active boat club, then, the old North Hudson Yacht Club recently vacated for the most part, after that the Von Dohln Marina, tied to our club were the Undercliff Club Barges which were in transit to be located close to us.

Sometime that morning as we were starting to install the new roof, we heard Doug Byrd holler "FIRE" "FIRE" at top his lungs from down below, we went down as fast as we could. I jumped from the roof down to the second floor porch, then ran for the outside stairs down to the main level, some others came down the ladder to the 2nd floor porch, and ran into the club, and took the inside steps down to the main floor. We converged on the north side



of the big room where all the canoes were. Through the last window on that side we could see the shad barge which was tied to us was on fire. One member got a garden hose while another broke the window to be able to hit the fire with water. There was wind coming around the corner of the club which prevented the water stream from effectively dosing the flames which quickly caught our cedar wood siding on fire. From that point the fire moved incredibly fast. There was no time to go upstairs to get our street clothes, keys or wallets. We decided to use the west side, the landside doorway to exit the club to get to the shore, a few hundred feet away. As I was the youngest member I felt that I should leave last after I was sure the others had gotten out okay. When I was sure everyone had left, I went down the long entrance way and started going down the outside hallway. When I got to the end outside, as soon as I cleared the building, I felt that my face was going to burn off as there was nothing between the flames and me. I sprinted away from the building on the boardwalk. But, as I was heading for the shore, I looked over toward the shad barge, and remembered there was a watchman living in the barge. I ran across the old barge that our walkway was on, and got to the 10 foot by 10 foot sliding freight door to the barge, as the regular door to the captains cabin was already covered in flames. The sliding door was locked from the inside, so the only thing

I could do was kick it and shove it back and forth a few inches which made a racket with the 12 inch steel wheels, that it was hanging on. Finally I heard the big hook on the inside of the door drop open, and the man slid the door drop open, rubbing his eyes like he had just woken up, I told him that his barge was on fire, he took one look at the club, and took off like a rabbit headed for the shore, I never knew old people could move so fast!

Upon reaching the shore I turned to look back at the club, and saw it was a mass of flames top to bottom. When I looked to the north side, I could see a lot of burning debree from the fire traveling north on the wind, and heat, and falling on the Fort Washington Canoe Club, and the New York Motorboat Club where friends of mine were busy winterizing their boats for the upcoming winter. As the boats were covered with canvases, they caught fire quickly. I started running down the trail toward the club to help them. I ran past the Fort Washington Canoe Club because I knew it was not been used then, and was locked up. Fortunately the front gate, and front door to the New York Motor Club were both not locked, so I went in running, I passed a member inside working on some project, I yelled to him "Your club is on fire.", and kept going until I got to the east side of the club house where I grabbed one of the big brass fire extinguishers, and crossed the short walkway to the long hauling

barges, that had a set of railroad tracks down the middle of the two hauling barges, that were end to end with cabin cruisers and other large motorboats lined up on each side of the ways. The members had already started fighting the fires that were starting on the boats, and their barges. I joined with them trying to save their boats, and the club. Shortly thereafter I saw a coast guard boat arrived from their base 10 miles away at the lower end of Manhattan. I felt a sense of relief. That looked like we were going to get some help. There also was a fellow from the camps in north Edgewater riding by the fires at that time in his runabout boat. I quickly realized that I needed to get to the Coast Guard boat to explain where we needed the most immediate help. I, and another member hailed down the fellow in the runabout, and got him to take two of us to the Coast Guard boat. As we got close to the Coast Guard boat, I saw the captain, he was a friend of mine from Edgewater. He said they did not have enough water under their keel to go in any closer. So, he gave us a gasoline powered water pump with a pickup hose, and a fire hose. We put the pump in the runabout and got close to the New York Motorboat Club, and started pumping water onto the hauling barge and boats. The fire hose recoil was causing the runabout to be pushed away from the fire. I jumped overboard to push the boat towards the fire. The water was just over waist high and I got enough traction in the mud to keep the boat from been push away, however, my legs were cold as hell in the water, my face was hot in the fire. The paint started to blister on the side of the boat closest to the fire, soon the owner had had enough, and wanted to leave. We now had to give the pump back to the Coast Guard. Myself, and the member returned to the club to continue fighting from there.

We resumed the firefighting but it was much worse than before, the boats were blowing up due to things inside the boats, like gas tanks, cooking fuels, etc. At that time the large acetoline, and oxygen welding tanks started blowing up on Harry Shelhorns' work barge between my club and the New York Motor Club. So all kinds of things were flying through the air. Back on the hauling barge fighting the fire was not going good. My shirt caught fire, and the hair of the member neared me caught fire, and we were being pushed towards the river. As the fire jumped north



to the old North Hudson Yacht Club which burnt down also.

Finally we were forced onto the landing float at the east end of the club facing New York, there were several dingies that were there upside down, and chained to the deck planks for winter storage, but the keys to the locks were in the inferno of the club house. I started breaking the deck planking that the boats were tied to with a pinch bar, so we could free them to use to escape the fire. The members looked back in disbelief and sadness, at what they had all lost, for some it was the best things they ever had.

The surviving active clubs were not allowed to rebuild, but we were able to purchase some more barges, that would be used to keep the clubs going. Up until the early 1990s when the army corps of engineers removed the Manhattan Island Boat Club, the Knickerbocker Canoe Club and New York Motor Club. There's a small cove there now. The dock builder Harry Shelhorn, and his partner, Charles Pickels, purchased the land where the old North Hudson Yacht Club was. I later became a real estate broker, and sold the property for them in 2002. It's now a group of upscale waterfront town houses called "The Moorings".

The only remaining boat club in the area now is the new North Hudson Yacht Club, north of where the fire was. Five boat clubs were lost that day in October along with dozens of beautiful boats, they are missed by many who loved boating with good friends, and their families. Several members relocated further north on the Hudson, and continued boating into the 2000s.

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