

That Old Enthusiasm Remains

Yacht Club Still Active

By GEORGE BRAGDON

One day in the 1890's a few of the boys were sitting around on nail kegs in Joe Alexander's blacksmith shop. They decided to form a boating group.

That was the start of the Hartford Club which — believe it or not — is still in existence.

Most people don't know there is a Hartford Yacht Club, complete with a clubhouse and brass cannon. The house sits partly hidden behind the dike on the East Hartford side of the Connecticut River, between the Bulkeley and Founders Bridges.

The club is a shadow of its former self. Once it had 300 members, including some of the financial and social leaders of the community, a yacht club said to rank fifth in size in the U.S.

Today there are 68 members. What they lack in numbers they make up for enthusiasm.

In Summer a floating pier, painted by the members a bright orange, lies moored in the water at the foot of the clubhouse steps. The pier serves the club fleet of modest size which rides at mooring in the shadow of the big, dark stone arches of the Bulkeley Bridge.

MOST MEMBERS work on their own boats during Spring overhaul, getting them ready for the water. Last Winter six of the members' boats were stored in the club's private yard on the river bank between the water and the clubhouse. This proved so satisfactory that the number will be increased to 11 next Winter.

Twice a year a Roger Sherman crane is hired, which, with padded slings, launches the craft into the water in Spring

and returns them to dry land in Fall. Two Roger Sherman employes and the club members furnish the labor for the job.

Other boats in the fleet are stored elsewhere in the off-season.

First to moor in the river every Spring is Paul Jaynes of Hartford with his 21-foot catboat, Mug, which is stored at Holter's Yard, Portland. He comes upriver in April before the club float is launched.

Another sailboat which spends much of its time at the Hartford anchorage is an 18-foot Cape Cod knockabout sloop with centerboard, owned by Richard K. Gorman, club treasurer and historian.

Mr. Gorman likes to take his wife and four children daysailing with a picnic dinner down the river as far as Rocky Hill.

THE FLEET in the river attains its greatest size in the Spring and Fall. There are some 15 boats gathered then, when the members are living at home in the Hartford area. In Summer when a number of boats go to the shore the fleet dwindles to a half dozen.

For instance, six members are also members of the Westerly, R.I., Yacht Club, keeping their craft in the water of Little Narragansett Bay during the Summer.

Club historian Gorman claims this is the next to the oldest surviving yacht club in the U.S., second only in age to the New York Yacht Club, a statement which will likely be disputed.

It was incorporated Apr. 23, 1895, but the club historian believes it was organized considerably before that. Since 1895 the club burgee has been a lone star against red, white and blue colors.

In support of his claim that the date of organization antedated 1895 Mr. Gorman displays some membership cards bearing names of early members and the club's first burgee, containing the letter H for Hartford instead of a star.

THE CLUB still possesses a brass cannon presented to it by the late actor William Gillette, one of the early members. The piece of artillery, on which is inscribed the name of the donor, the date, 1900, and the marker, L. T. Snow of New Haven, was used at one time for races and the daily ceremony of raising and lowering the colors.

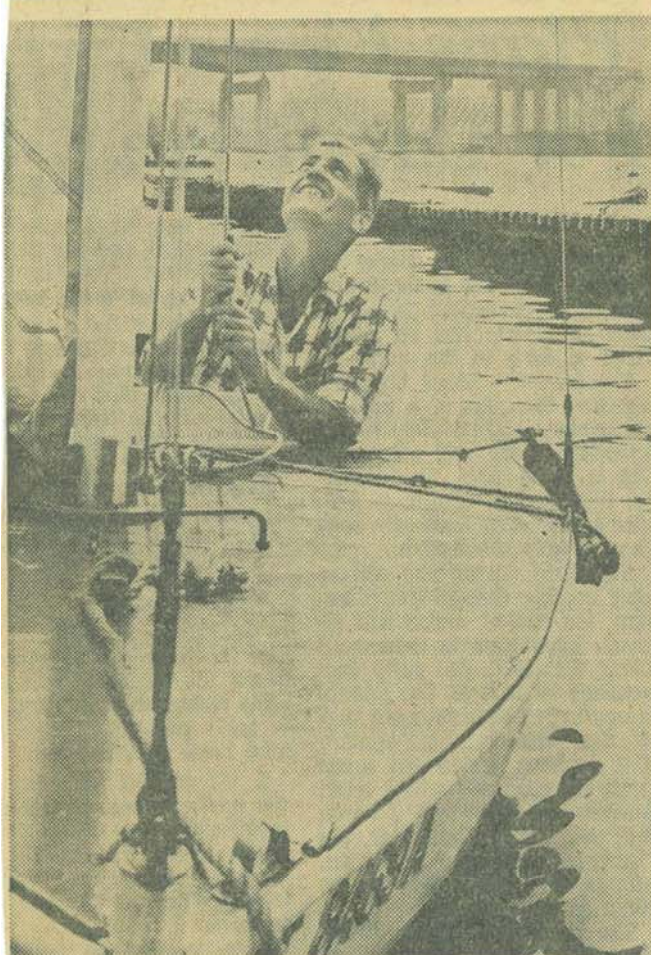
As transportation by train and automobile developed during the heyday of the club, more and more members spent their summers at the shore. Consequently the Hartford Yacht Club established branches, or "stations" as they were called.

Stations were maintained at Fishers Island, Niantic, New London, and Fenwick. Historian Gorman said eventually they became independent yacht clubs, surviving to this day.

The club commodore is Olin W. Stone of East Hartford. Stanley K. Dimock of West Hartford, 86 years old, is the oldest member in point of age and membership.

Joe Alexander's blacksmith shop where the club was organized according to tradition was situated down by the river at 241 State St. The pioneers moved their headquarters from Joe's nail kegs to a river picnic barge named Daisy.

They built their first clubhouse on the Hartford shore at the foot of Grove St. In 1914 — half a century ago this year — they erected the present building in East Hartford.



SAIL HO! Dick Gorman hoists canvas aboard sailboat on Connecticut River. Founders Bridge in background.