

# A history of the Candlewood Yacht Club

By John O'Hern

Without Lake Candlewood, there would be no Candlewood Yacht Club. Therefore I am including some of the background history with regard to the formation of this unique lake.

Up to mid-1926, the soon-to-be lake area was a typical rural New England valley with dirt roads, farms and orchards bounded by Danbury, New Milford and Sherman to the south and north.

On July 15, 1926, the Connecticut Light and Power Company's Board of Directors approved a plan to form the lake, pump water into it from the Housatonic River and let the water flow through an immense pipe (penstock) through a turbine and thus produce electricity.

The plan went into effect almost immediately and it took 26 months to turn the valley into a lake. On September 29, 1928 the water reached an elevation of 429', and the lake was complete. This was the first large scale operation of a pumped storage facility in the United States. It covers 5.420 acres, is 11 miles long, has a shoreline of over 60 miles, and is two miles wide at its widest point. The maximum depth is 85', with an average of 29-30'. For sailors, the winds are variable.

Although it was almost called Lake Danbury, Candlewood ultimately got its name from New Milford's Candlewood Mountain, which was named after the Candlewood trees, whose saplings were sometimes used as candles by early settlers.

The earliest club records that were found were from 1933. The club consisted of a group of sailing enthusiasts on the Lake, and it was initially called the "Yacht Racing Association of Lake Candlewood".

The Association was incorporated on May 18, 1937, and our present burgee was defined in the constitution, plus an official seal. Dues were \$3.00 a year. At one time, the association had an address at the Hotel Green in Danbury, a lake station at Candlewood Island Clubhouse, and a racing station on Bootlegger Island. The Island included a starting area, a cottage, outdoor fireplace, chick sales (outhouses) and floats. The season was from July 4<sup>th</sup> to Labor Day and roughly a dozen races were held with a variety of classes of which a number are now distant memories.

The war years interrupted activities until 1946. Dues were \$6.00 and Lightnings, Pennants, Seagulls, Comets and Nimblets were the major classes involved in racing. By 1948, there were approximately 65 members and the 15 Lightnings were split into A and B fleets.

Activities continued into the 1950s with the Flying Dutchmen, Flying Terns and Thistles being included in the racing classes.

On May 31, 1961, the "Yacht Racing Association of Lake Candlewood" officially became the "Candlewood Yacht Club". At that time, dues were \$40.00 (with a \$5.00 discount if paid before mid-March) and moorings were \$70.00. The club was then located on the second floor over the Candlewood Inn in Brookfield. Racing was held off Bootleggers Island. Membership seemed to have stabilized at about 60-70.

On August 10 & 11, 1963, Candlewood Yacht Club was the host for the first National Sunfish Regatta. Over 100 boats participated. Scott Stokes from Winnetka, Illinois was the winner. His crew was Marion O'Hern of CYC. The races were very well run, and CYC received national attention. As a result, we held an annual Sunfish/Sailfish Invitational Regatta the weekend after Labor Day for nine years.

In July 1966, Candlewood Yacht Club was host for a district Regatta of the Flying Scot class. The entire club supported the event, and out of town participants were guests in our member's homes. Again the races were very well run. For the first race, a kilted bagpipe player played tunes from the back of a Chris Craft from the start to the first mark.

We also held a Cape Cod Gemini class regatta, their first national event, in the mid-60s. Again, all club members supported another well-run regatta.

In fact, over the years, many regattas have been held with good representation from many other clubs.

In the fall of 1965, we were notified that our lease with Candlewood Inn would not be renewed. In essence, we would no longer have a clubhouse or access to the water. Fortunately, property that could be leased was finally found in New Fairfield. It contained 9 buildings, similar to our sail loft, that were used as summer cottages. The first year, we had a parking area and access to the water and moorings. That fall, all the buildings except the sail loft were razed, and the property was graded and seeded. We had a 6 year lease on this property, bounded by the wall on east and roughly where our present ramp is located on the west.

Slips for 12 boats were installed as an experiment in 1967 at a cost of \$1,560, and their success has led to our present extensive system, which supports 56 boats.

Based on sufficient interest and participation, a sailing class was held for women members in August, 1973. 19 women attended the series of sessions that was concluded with a great race in Flying Scots. Over the years, various clinics and instructional sessions led by both local and nationally known sailors have been held for members. Also, with enough interest, junior sailing classes have been held, usually utilizing members' Sunfish and our Committee boat.

During the mid-70s, club members began owning larger boats with cabins and varied interior accommodations. Eventually, there were enough boats of this type and a "Cruising Class" was formed. The class is active socially throughout the year and PHRF handicap racing for the fleet is included in the club racing schedule.

Our annual Club Championship event has been decided each year with all qualified contestants sailing an elimination series, in Sunfish, in the fall, typically around Labor Day. A rafting party attached to the committee boat, plus a crazy betting system, have made this a great occasion following our summer racing series.

Over the years, frostbite races have been held in late fall. There were a series of short races held in small sloops (ie: Flying Terns). Shortly after our move to our present site, these races were terminated due to a lack of interest and availability of small boats.

Two islands on the Lake (Bootlegger & Skeleton) have been leased for many years from CL&P. In earlier times, races were conducted from Bootlegger Island. In the early 1960s, power boats with halyards rigged came into use and provided better starting line areas. Then in 1964, we acquired a 24' Kayot for use as a committee boat. This was later replaced with an aluminum 28', 4 pontoon boat. Since Bootlegger Island was the focal point for club activities, Skeleton Island was used very little, even though it too had docks and a privy for several years. In recent years, we have not attempted to control its use and it has become popular for public use.

As time went by, many improvements have been made to our property. Of significant note is that we were able to purchase the first piece of leased land, after an extension on the original lease in 1977. This was preceded by purchasing an additional piece of land and a building from Chatterton Marina in 1975. The two pieces make up our current property and that building is our current clubhouse. Also, heads complying with local regulations were constructed. Additional docks, slips, and moorings were added over the years, and improvements in the clubhouse, and many other projects have contributed to our fine area.

Most Commodores have been faced with some crisis or project, but unfortunately, we do not have the space to recognize each and every one. They have varied from finding new property (O'Hern) to digging privy holes on both Islands (Madsen), head construction (Parsons), property purchase (McCarthy), outdoor grill with time capsule (Bunce), replacing our entire dock system (Bovaird/Bozzuti), just to name a few.

More recently, we have continued our racing heritage with regular races for our Flying Scot class and our Cruiser class (using PHRF handicaps). We also have occasional races for centerboard boats, and of course we still hold our annual Club Championship using Sunfish. Each October for the last several years, we host a Flying Scot invitational which has seen some competitors travel over 170 miles to participate.

Each year, we also ensure we have at least one Youth Sailing program. It is vital for the future of sailing that we get our youth involved.

For over 75 years, we have been had a great boating organization on Lake Candlewood. What about the next 75? We can only speculate.