



O.H. Gunkler about 1954 (Lois Greene seated)

CRYSTAL LAKE YACHT CLUB

1947-1974

"OCCIE" GUNKLER

SAILING MASTER – COMMODORE

as told by Dr. O. H. Gunkler, February 10, 1993

During the winter of 1946-47, while I was serving as chairman of the Department of Health Physical Education and Athletics at Berea College, I received a letter from the secretary of The Crystal Lake Yacht Club of Frankfort, Michigan, asking me to recommend a young couple who could serve the club as Sailing Master and Social Director for the Junior Fleet.

I was at a loss as to whom I could recommend. I carried the letter home and asked Ora if she could think of anyone for this job. Her immediate response was, "That is the very thing you would enjoy doing." She was right! Having grown-up on Lake Ontario, boats had been in my blood since birth and water activities were my profession. The only obstacle was the letter had requested a young couple, and we were not a young couple. We had three children and a fourth on the way. She insisted that I answer the letter, explain the situation and tell them I thought I might be interested.

I responded to judge William Gardens, then commodore of the Club. He was pleased to get a couple with our qualifications and hired me immediately. My starting salary would be \$250.00 for the season. This, I figured, would pay for groceries and give the family a summer vacation on beautiful Crystal Lake.

In the early spring Charles Ward Seabury Sr., a trustee of Berea College, a friend of mine, and also a member of Crystal Lake Yacht Club, came to Berea for a meeting of the trustees. When I met him here he said, "I had dinner with Judge Bardens in Chicago, and he tells me you are to be the new Sailing Master at the Yacht Club." I responded, "Yes, and you are probably responsible for the appointment!" He said, "No, I knew nothing about it, and it is probably just as well."

I reported for duty on "put in day" which was about the 20th of June, 1947. I was both surprised and disappointed at what I had to work with. I thought

that any yacht club with members like Mrs. Willard Webb, Judge William Bardens, and especially Charles Ward Seabury would be quite a club.

What I found was a group of shirttail sailors with little formal organization, three "C" scows, old cast-off wooden, leaking boats, which had been given to the Club by members who had purchased new boats, and also an old rebuilt motor boat recently painted red, white and blue, which had also been donated to the Club as patrol boat. I soon learned that these boats were my responsibility. I was supposed keep this motley group in repair and safe for club members to sail!! A full time job for a maintenance man! This had not been part of the agreement. The Sailing Master was also the official organizer and starter for all races as well as the chief patrol officer in case of a capsized or other accidents. While Crystal Lake is an ideal sailing lake, it is not without its perils. A sudden shift or increase of wind could capsize as many as five boats at a time.

The approach to the Clubhouse was by way of a 300 yard gravel drive off M 22. There was a small parking area adjacent. The Clubhouse was an ordinary frame structure containing a large main room with a fire place, a screened-in porch, a small kitchen, men's and women's dressing rooms, and a semi-furnished, small room, with bath for the Sailing Master. The pier, beyond the screened-in porch was about 65 feet long with a T at the end from which the races started.

The beach of the Yacht Club was shared by members of the Country Club. Most were members of both organizations. When the Country Club needed sand, it was excavated on the jointly owned land with the Yacht Club. As a result, over the years a large hole had been dredged close to the edge of Yacht Club beach. A diving platform had been established over this hole. While it was a fun situation for experienced swimmers and divers, I recognized it as a dangerous situation. The absentee-fathers flew in on weekends to sail, and I became a surrogate father to all the children on the beach during the week. I was the primary safety person. Safety was paramount. One of my first jobs would be to insist that the Club hire a qualified life guard, who would be under my supervision. I would make arrangements for young aspiring life guards to attend Red Cross water safety schools and become certified before they could be hired.

The summer I became Sailing Master of the Club, the Club had in place a remarkable group of officers and an excellent board of directors. They were involved in trying to establish a Junior Fleet and a recreational program for the young people. This was the most encouraging aspect of the job for me since I enjoyed working with young people. "Skip" Wynkoop was Fleet Captain and was far-sighted enough to see that the future of the club rested

in the hands of the young people. He had been delegated the responsibility of purchasing six Wood-Pussies, a round-bottomed cat rigged, center-board boat, in order to start a Junior sailing fleet. Skip and I worked closely together to establish the Wood-Pussy Fleet. My professional training focused on the education of young people through athletics. Such things as learning skills, discipline, sportsmanship, responsibility were important rules of the road and were strictly adhered to. The races started on time, safety equipment was required, a swimming test was mandatory, and care of the boat was the owner's responsibility. This was the beginning of a long, successful, and expanding venture for the Club. It gave the Sailing Master the opportunity to develop an unusually effective sailing program for both Fleets and a well organized recreational program for the young people.

The membership increased rapidly from around thirty to over a hundred members in a short time. Along with this program, I convinced the Club to get rid of their leaky boats, thus making each member responsible for his own boat. We now had both an expanding Wood-Pussy Fleet, a "C" Fleet, and gradually "E" scows began to appear to form yet another Fleet.

After serving the Club for 26 summers, I decided it was time to retire. With the acceptance of my resignation, the board immediately elected me Commodore. They had in mind a building project which would double the size of the Clubhouse. The membership had expanded to the point that more room was mandatory.

Plans were developed, a builder hired -- nothing more to do but find the money! This, of course, was my responsibility. The board also ruled that I had to have the money in hand by November 1, before construction could begin. I started a fund drive and by mid-October we still lacked about \$10,000. I contacted one of the mainstay members of the Club, who immediately offered \$5000 more on his pledge. I did not accept this. I asked him to underwrite the balance needed. I would continue to work to meet the dead line and to make every effort to get money from members who had not yet made a commitment. He agreed. The positive responses continued, the contractor was signed, and by November 1, we had the required amount.

Next spring the addition to the Clubhouse, doubling its size, was completed. I am sure anything else did as Commodore is lost in memory

Over the years I have never regretted my association with Crystal Lake Yacht Club. The work was hard, demanding and challenging, with little pay, but it gave me and my family the opportunity to know some wonderful people who became part of our lives. It also gave my family

the opportunity to learn and participate in all the water sports, a decided change from the academic life they were so engulfed in.

From a disorganized operation of a few members and a few leaking boats in 1947, I had brought the Club along to a highly sophisticated sailing club and a Clubhouse twice its original size which could accommodate the ever expanding membership.