

Yacht Club has Williams Bay Roots



The Lake Geneva Yacht Club and the Geneva Lake Sailing School opened its new facility this summer on land in Fontana that it has occupied since the 1920s, but did you know that the club's first home was in Williams Bay at Cedar Point?

The Geneva Lake Yacht Club (as it was initially known) started in 1874 with the first Sheridan Prize Race. The race was held in honor of visiting Lieutenant

General Philip Sheridan. An account of the race published in the Lake Geneva Herald on September 5, 1874 stated *"On Monday last, was sailed another exciting yacht race."* The race created excitement around the lake that *"was of the keenest kind."* The Herald went on to describe the race course as *"a double triangle race, being 3 miles south from the Whiting House [Hotel] pier, then 2 miles east into Button's Bay, then north to the place of starting, then repeat [the course again], [with the] course being nearly 16 miles in length plus tacking."* The Herald reported the victory of the Nettie owned by Julian S. Rumsey was greeted with *"great cheering by friends and screeching steam whistles."*

On April 29, 1876, a group of sailing enthusiasts, including A.C. Calkins, Al. Lytle, George L. Dunlap, General A.C. Ducat, John Bullock, John W French, Julian S. Rumsey, and N.K. Fairbank, met at the Whiting House Hotel to adopt the bylaws and constitution of the club and establish the rules governing future races. The group also recognized August 31, 1874, the date of the first Sheridan Prize race, as the founding date of the club. For the first 32 years of its existence the club would have no home. The Yacht Club reorganized in 1891 and was incorporated as the Lake Geneva Yacht Club in 1894. In 1902, the club merged with the West End Yacht Club.



The racing boats for the first few years were sandbaggers varying in length from approximately 15 feet to 25 feet. The boats sailed against one another with time allowances. Every time the boat came about the sandbags had to be shifted to the windward side. The sandbaggers lasted until about 1900 when Class A and Class B boats were introduced.

In 1906, with the membership numbering at more than 100, it built its first clubhouse, leasing property at the

Sandbagger - these boats, with their clouds of canvas, called for "skill, courage, and genius" and a "high degree of alertness." Sandbaggers usually raced with ten or more crew members, and they often capsized. (Photo credit: LGYC)

tip of the Cedar Point for \$500 per year from Kellogg Fairbank. Fairbank had been the club's commodore in 1890 and was the son of the club's first commodore, N. K. Fairbank. The Cedar Point clubhouse was an attractive two-story building with a wide veranda, set among trees. The future seemed promising. Sailing in 1906 was in four classes, designated by size as A, B, C, and D, and the club held some big regattas in those early years, most importantly the Northwestern Regatta Association's events in 1906, 1907, and 1908. In 1906, the regatta attracted more than 50 boats.



Cedar Point Clubhouse - LGYC
(Photo Credit Martha Cucco)

A few years later club members registered some concerns about the terms of the lease and by the time it expired in 1916, Mr. Fairbank chose not to renew it. The club was homeless once again, holding races from club member's piers, until club members bought an existing building and property across the lake in Linn Township in 1926. It was at this location that members started a sailing school in 1938. The sailing school would become a separate entity in 1953 and is now an important community resource. Last year, instructors taught more than 400 children and adults in classes that ranged from beginner to advanced sailors.

On June 9, 2015, the school started its sailing programs in its new home, where it occupies classrooms on the first floor. The yacht club, which officially opened during the first week in July, occupies the second floor. The entire property has been named the Buddy Melges Sailing Center in honor of its most prominent sailor.

Yacht Club has Williams Bay Roots© by Michelle Bie Love

I would like to thank Ellen Bentsen, Lake Geneva Yacht Club historian for her help with information about the history of the yacht club in Cedar Point and for answering all of my questions about the history of the club and sailing.