

Port Arthur Yacht Club's First Twenty-Four Years A History Written by Lowry Freeman in 1988

Since the Port Arthur Yacht Club was organized twenty-four years ago, and since only five charter members are still in the Club, Dieter [Junge] asked me to give a brief history of the club's origin and growth for the benefit of the 200 or more members who subsequently joined. At the time of our charter, the Sportsman's Club, now the Conservation Club, handled the slip rental for the Marina and turned the receipts over to the City of Port Arthur. When the Lake Sabine Sailing Club moved to the Rainbow Bridge, those members who stayed at the Pier, plus other interested sailors, got together, requested and were given the Sportsman's Club's permission to take over the facilities, which consisted of what was called the "Aloha Hut," a few stalls, and a hand-cranked boat hoist. The Aloha Hut, which we now refer to as the "Screen House" had nine pilings which had been erected by Gulf States Utilities as a favor to their employee, Don Boring, and was covered with palm fronds.

In 1965, we petitioned and were granted a Charter by the State of Texas and, at our first meeting, Don Boring was elected Commodore. The name, Port Arthur Yacht Club, was adopted, to be located at the Pleasure Island Marina, with the object of encouraging and stimulating yacht sailing and racing.

Since the Aloha Hut was the only shelter we had, there were several things we planned to do; namely, build a roof to replace the palm fronds, pour a concrete floor, screen the pilings to keep out mosquitoes, provide sanitary rest rooms, and attempt to get an electric hoist. We did the first three things, but because the only sewer line was on the boulevard and it was three feet higher than our proposed rest rooms, the City, unofficially, allowed us to put in a septic tank and our oldest member, Tom Ellis, installed the plumbing facilities. We were given a hoist which had been on the paved drive along the Sabine-Neches ship channel and our members installed it in its present location, and sometime later, added a 4-ton electric motor.

Most of you know that, until the bridge was built across the canal, the only access to the Island was over a cantilever bridge located between the Sub-Courthouse and Island boulevard. The bridge had an operator on the City side who opened and closed it for ship traffic but opened it at midnight and left it open until the next morning. Couples romancing on the Island side had to watch the time closely or be stranded. Accidents between ships and the bridge were frequent, ultimately resulting in the bridge being inoperable for three years – from 1968 to 1971. This, of course, didn't help sailing. During this time the golfers engaged a boat and operator to take them from the American Legion Clubhouse on the canal to the golf course. It was a long walk between the boat landing and the marina, but I was fortunate because Weldon Denbo, after a few beers, bought a used Pontiac for \$50 and drove it around thru Hackberry, Holly Beach, across the Causeway Bridge, and parked it at the Golf Course. John Ardoin kept a motor scooter and Weldon Drennan had a 1960 Ford for use by his Scout troop.

Our boats were mostly centerboarders or were trailerable which could be transported easily and when we celebrated Port Arthur's Diamond Jubilee with an Open Regatta, 63 boats were registered. We had Geary 18's, Lightnings, Thistles, Flying Scots, Windmills, Catamarans, and Portsmouth and MORC cruisers. They came from Lake Charles, Shreveport, Houston, Seabrook, Beaumont, and Orange. At another time 20 Flying Dutchmen held their Regional Championship races here and later, the Tornado Nationals. Things have gradually changed, not just here, but in most other places, as more than more sailors changed from "fun boats" to family boats, with keels. Since these cannot be transported easily, you can understand why we don't have the regatta participation we used to have.

The need for bulkheading and stalls was quite obvious and Danny Murphy, who was Commodore in 1974, wrote a succinct explanation of our good fortune. He said

The marina was an unsightly area, with a few rickety stalls here and there, no water or electricity at the stalls, potholes in the road, and a shack that served as a shelter for club members. The city would not allocate money for capital improvements and Club was reluctant to spend money on land they did not own or lease. Bobby LeBlanc, the Island Director, wanted to improve the marina, but he had no money and had no chance of getting any from the City.

George Lohmann, a Club member, came up with a plan. He felt that a satisfactory arrangement could be worked out the City, provided the Club would provide 100% of the financing. He then outlined how the money could be raised and paid back. He would personally sign a bank note for around \$100,000 to fund construction of modern stalls; they would be first class in every respect. The rent from the stalls would be used to pay off the note. After that the rent would be used to build additional stalls and improve the marina. The Club itself would raise \$12,000 thru assessment of its members to be used to build the bulkhead now in front of our Clubhouse.

Everybody worked together and the project, as planned by George Lohmann, was completed on schedule. It worked to the benefit of both parties: the City got a modern marina, of which they could be proud, at absolutely no cost to them. The Club members had a home and modern slips at reasonable rent.

In effect, the Club members financed the improvements in the beginning and practically all of the improvements since then, thru rental payments.

At that time we were all in agreement that we wanted a Club and marina that would be an asset to the area in many ways, such as providing recreation, developing sailing on Lake Sabine, and, yes, a selling point for bringing in new business. We wanted a low cost operation that would be affordable to as many people as possible. It was not conceived as a money making operation, but rather to provide enjoyment for a large number of people.

It is my understanding that some people are looking upon the marina as a source of revenue for funding unrelated expenditures. If that becomes a reality, what will happen to the sailors driven out by the high cost and the empty stalls created when they leave?

You can see that, without George Lohmann's generosity, the Port Arthur Yacht Club would not have grown as rapidly as it has, or perhaps, would not exist. Mrs. Lohmann, George's mother, gave the Club a truckload of palm trees, and older members gave \$50 each for additional palms.

Finally, on July 8, 1974, we were granted a 40-year lease by the City of Port Arthur on the two fingers of land on which we have slips B and C on one and D and E on the other and the property between B and E back to the boulevard. This lease provided the impetus we needed to start planning for a Clubhouse. In 1977, a Building Committee was formed and Milton Bell, an architect, who is a member of the Club, prepared plans for submissions to the contractors. Financing, of course was imperative and it was decided to raise the money by the sale of Debentures. The September, 1977, *Mainsheet* said:

Because we have had so many new members join since the Club first began selling Debentures, a little explanation is in order. The Yacht Club has absolutely no credit because it is a club and therefore cannot borrow money necessary to build its Clubhouse. In order to raise the necessary capital, it is selling bonds, in the form of Debentures, to its own membership. These bonds have maturity dates of 3, 4, 5, and 6 years and interest rates varying from 6% on the 3-yr. to 7% on the

6-yr notes. Conservative estimates of the Club's projected growth indicates that we can pay off these notes with initiation fees to be paid by present and new members. In this way, the Club can borrow from its own membership with the member getting the interest money that normally would be paid to a lending institution. With the money from Debentures, plus money now in the Building Fund, we will have the necessary amount to pay for our Clubhouse. We do need the money soon because any contractor we get is going to want cash.

The building cost was \$100,000 without air conditioning or heating. However, I think that all of us can attest to the fact that, despite our financial problems, the Clubhouse was built; additions, including air conditioning, heating, kitchen equipment, and a brand new room, were made and, according to Barbara [Switzer]'s last Treasury report, we are still solvent!!!

I hope I've covered the high spots of our history, but if you have any questions, I shall try to answer them or get help from the other four charter members: Eddie Schuhardt, John Ardoin, Weldon Denbo, or Danny Murphy.

Signed by Lowry Freeman, Charter Member