



125
The first 125 years
The National Class



“IT HAS BEEN SAID THAT THOUGH
GOD CANNOT ALTER THE PAST, HISTORIANS CAN.”

SAMUEL BUTLER, *EREWON REVISITED*

Henry Ford, as usual, was very direct.

“HISTORY IS MORE OR LESS BUNK.”

HENRY FORD, 1916

However, to recognize our 125th Anniversary, we felt it should be fun and might even be instructive to look at some highlights of our colourful past. We hope you enjoy this brief history, and that the next 125 years will be equally memorable.

G.A. FIERHELLER, PRESIDENT
1998-1999

1874 And All That...

IN THE NATIONAL CLUB CENTENNIAL BOOK, PUBLISHED IN 1974, THE AUTHOR NOTED that a respectable club should have no history. A club's purpose is to quietly and privately serve its members. Only through them should it make its mark on society.

The National Club has largely followed this advice, but any organization founded in the year that Winston Churchill was born, has inevitably played some role on its own.

The Club was indeed started as the home for a political movement—the Canada First Party. This uniquely Canadian organization had a political platform that only a Canadian could love. It supported the seemingly contrary positions of loyalty to the Empire as well as strong Canadian independence with a dash of healthy skepticism about the growing influence of the United States. The latter is understandable, as 1874 was only seven years after Confederation and just a short time after the turmoil of the American Civil War.

The National Club received its Charter on July 6th, 1874 with the aim of providing the Canada First Party with a headquarters. The Party however, could not survive its diverse platform. Its ideas were absorbed by other parties and the Canada First Party faded. The Club, however, did not and remains after 125 years a vibrant and non-political organization.



THE ORIGINAL 1874 CHARTER

The National Club received its Charter on July 6th, 1874 with the aim of providing the Canada First Party with a headquarters. The Party, however did not survive. The Club did and remains after 125 years a vibrant and non-political organization.

The Founding Fathers

NOT SURPRISINGLY FOR THOSE DAYS, THE FOUNDERS WERE ALL MALE AND WERE AMONGST the more influential figures of their time. Dr. Goldwin Smith, the first President, was noted for his eclectic interests and outrageous observations. He did not always see eye to eye with W.P. Howland, the First Vice President. Howland was the architect of the "Toronto the Good" philosophy. At one point Goldwin Smith commented that Howland "instituted a crusade against bars and brothels with the result we had the most drunken Christmas ever known in Toronto."

It is little wonder that given their differing opinions, the rooms named after them are at opposite ends of the third floor!

Without a doubt however, the early leaders of the Club were also the leaders of their day. Matthew Arnold noted that Goldwin Smith was "a scholar, a thinker and a master of the English tongue."

Howland became the second Lieutenant Governor of Ontario. Amongst other founders, the Hon. Edward Blake became the first Premier of Ontario. Sir Oliver Mowat became the second. Their portraits hang in the main dining room.



FOUNDING FATHER
AND FIRST PRESIDENT,
GOLDWIN SMITH

The First Club

THE NATIONAL CLUB OPENED AS THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE CANADA FIRST PARTY ON March 30th, 1875 at a location near the old Stock Exchange on Bay Street. Members of the original Board of 28 put up a mortgage totalling \$5,500. This amount was forgiven when the Club became 'financially embarrassed' shortly after the demise of the Canada First Party.

By 1892, it was felt that the Club either had to move or renovate to keep up with the growing competition from other Clubs in the area. However, the Depression experienced in the 1890's made renovation the best short term choice. In 1896 the Club settled into enlarged and improved premises on the same site.

This allowed The National Club to entertain such dignitaries as Sir William Mullock, Postmaster General and later Chief Justice of Ontario in 1898 and in 1902 a dinner was held to commemorate the pioneering transmission across the Atlantic by Marconi. It is this latter event that led to the renaming of the bar on the entrance level "The Marconi Lounge", in 1998.

By the turn of the Century, the Club was once again prospering. The number of resident members was increased from 350 to 500 and this again put pressure on the premises. The Directors concluded that this time a move to new premises was essential.

THE NATIONAL CLUB'S
FIRST HOME NEAR THE STOCK
EXCHANGE ON BAY STREET



The New Building

DESPITE THE OBSERVATION THAT MOVING NORTH OF KING STREET WOULD PUT THE Club 'out of the core', the new location was selected on the site of the Robinson House on the east side of Bay Street. The Club raised \$60,000 by subscription which, together with a \$40,000 surplus already accumulated, provided a sizeable amount with which to launch the project.

The cornerstone was laid on September 12th, 1906 by the same Sir W.P. Howland who had been one of the Founders of the Club. The Club premises, which we still occupy, opened with a luncheon on December 17th, 1907. *The Globe* reported that "architecturally it is a triumph".

The First World War, however took its toll and the building and its equipment were allowed to fall behind the times. Major G.A. Sampson, the Club's Secretary from 1920 to 1924 reported that "the 1905 kitchen had been modern in all respects; wooden refrigeration with large blocks of ice manhandled from the alley to the ice compartments. There was no high-pressure cooker and no soup kettles. The range was coal-fired. There was no broiler, and the floors were cement."

The members agreed to an assessment of \$50,000 to make the kitchen and other parts of the Club state-of-the-art. This was completed in time for the celebration of the Club's 50th Anniversary, with an elaborate dinner on April 1st, 1924 complete with a "chorus of six charming young ladies". The latter, Sampson noted, caused some consternation amongst several of the members!



THE TROWEL USED TO LAY
THE CORNERSTONE FOR THE
NEW BUILDING IN 1906

The Club's 50th Anniversary, featured an elaborate dinner on April 1st, 1924 complete with a "chorus of six charming young ladies". The latter, Sampson noted, caused some consternation amongst several of the members!

The Second 50 Years

THE DEPRESSION YEARS WERE NOT EASY FOR ANY CLUB. BY 1937 MEMBERSHIP HAD fallen and the Club admitted 100 new members without entrance fee—then about \$300. The Club however survived this, as it did the restrictive liquor laws, then in effect.

R.M. Walker, Club Secretary at the time, reported that “arrangements were made to sell ‘specials’ to the members. A euphemism for whisky or gin at 60¢ each, an admirable, if illegal arrangement of which the L.C.B.O. was blissfully unaware.”

He noted that when their inspector called, “he would first join me for a sherry in the Secretary’s office. While we chatted, the cigars and wine manager was alerted, and quickly cleared the decks for inspection”.

Dinners for notables continued to be held. Confirming the non-political nature of the Club, both R. B. Bennett, the newly elected Conservative Prime Minister, and Mitchell Hepburn, the Liberal Premier of Ontario, spoke to the Club. Mr. Walker noted that “I think Mr. Hepburn was the more entertaining.”

The start of World War II provided its own problems. There was a shortage of everything, including staff, members to use the Club and of course liquor and other supplies. However the resurgence after the War put new demands on the building, and in 1953, more than 45 years after the building was built, another major renovation took place. The Clubhouse quietly reopened on November 6th, 1953.



THE GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY
MENU FROM 1924

In the 30's the Club Secretary reported that when the L.C.B.O. inspector called, “he would first join me for a sherry in the Secretary’s office. While we chatted, the cigars and wine manager was alerted, and quickly cleared the decks for inspection”.

Modern Times

By 1974, the CENTENNIAL OF THE CLUB, MEMBERSHIP HAD GROWN FROM 800 TO over 1,100. The Club had imposed a limit of 825 resident members and a waiting list existed. These were the 'golden days of Clubdom.'

John Porter in *The Vertical Mosaic* in the 1960's said of Club life, "The elite world appears as a complex network of small groupings interlocked by a high degree of cross-membership."

This is a far cry from Peter Newman in 1998 who entitled a chapter in *The Titans*, "The Boarding Up of the Clubs". The truth lies somewhere between as we shall see.

The 1974 Centennial was a great success despite the apparent absence of the chorus of charming young ladies. In addition to the commemorative book referenced earlier, a gold metallic membership card was produced which, one member complained, weighed down his wallet. He, however, carried it with pride.

The outside of the building was cleaned and the Club was ready for its next century.

The liquor laws of the 1930's had also been modernized and under the guidance of Secretary Manager, Peter Hackenberger, the Club built up an enviable wine cellar, now containing over 20,000 bottles. Club life was undoubtedly comfortable.



SOME OF THE FINE
WINES CURRENTLY IN
THE CLUBS' CELLARS

Stare Super Vias Antiquas

HOWEVER, THE CLUB COULD NOT 'CLING TO THE OLD WAYS'. WITHIN A DECADE, A NEW opportunity arose. The rapid expansion of sky-scrapers in the core area made air rights valuable. While many remain amazed that anyone could sell something you could not see, and for which the owner had no conceivable use, the Board in 1983 sold these rights to the developers of the proposed Scotia Plaza for over \$3 million.

Due to the foresight of these Directors, the Club was able to undertake a further major renovation and still retain a sizeable cash asset. The Club to this day maintains a very healthy balance sheet.

A further enduring benefit resulted. The Club obtained a direct entrance to The Path, providing an underground link to nearly all the major buildings in the core area. The Club thus became one of the most accessible locations in the city.

But more changes were afoot. Despite the observation by Anthony Lejeune as late as 1984 in *The Gentlemen's Clubs of London*, that "socialists, like women, are not, on the whole, clubbable," the National Club has always welcomed women in the Club. However, this did not extend to admitting women to membership. This policy was clearly out-of-step with the times. A vote on allowing women membership was held at the Annual General Meeting in 1992 and the result was virtually unanimously in favour of full membership for women.

The Club went further and extended full privileges to spouses of members of either gender at no additional cost – a benefit believed to be unique to the National Club. No vote is recorded on allowing 'socialists' into the Club, this being perhaps too radical a move!

THE CURRENT LOCATION OF
THE CLUB AT 503 BAY STREET



Ready For The Millennium

IN 1997, THE CLUB WAS PRESENTED WITH A MAGNIFICENT COAT-OF-ARMS, ONE OF THE few to incorporate the logo of a club.

The Club today continues to evolve and to build on its traditions of 125 years. In the late 1980's and early 1990's when the economy was in the doldrums, most clubs suffered declining membership. Firms that had sponsored many members cut their numbers back. Older members were retiring and clubs in general seemed to be less relevant to new younger prospects. The National Club was no exception.

The Club's Boards of Directors over the last several years have addressed this by seeking the right combination of maintaining the Club as a unique experience and preserving the best of its traditions, while ensuring its relevance to 'the New Titans' as Peter Newman calls them.

This has involved modernizing menus, recognizing changing dress codes, revising smoking rules and providing access to health club facilities. The result is that the Club's membership is once again rising impressively. Club traditions will continue to change. The need for Club fellowship will not.



THE CLUB FLAG

The rapid expansion of sky-scrapers in the core area made air rights valuable. While many remain amazed that anyone could sell something you could not see, the Board in 1983 sold these rights to the developers of the proposed Scotia Plaza.