

OTTAWA TENNIS AND LAWN BOWLING CLUB

The tennis club makes heritage a priority

By Janet B. Uren

Frankly, an old wooden box makes a rather poor footing. As restoration of the OTLBC Clubhouse gathers steam in winter 2021-22 and a century of makeshift repairs is exposed, there have been some real surprises. One of these was the discovery of a wooden Coca-Cola box, filled with concrete and jammed in to support a beam holding up the floor. Clearly maintaining the Clubhouse has not been a priority in the past century. But why not?

In 1881, the Ottawa Tennis Club was founded by some of the leaders in Ottawa society. They were members of the Governor General’s circle, politicians, professional people and businessmen, and, on the whole, they had money. No wonder that, as the club moved away from the downtown, into the Glebe and finally to Ottawa South, they could afford to build and furnish a series of fine clubhouses.

That club of the past was exclusive. It was a closed society, with new members being nominated by existing members, and with women and certain other groups being deliberately excluded. And it was costly. Membership initially cost

\$10 a year, as well as the one-time purchase of a share in the club for another \$10. The racket cost \$10, and the special white flannels another \$5. In the 1880s, when the average income in Ottawa ranged from \$400 to \$500 a year, most people could not afford to play tennis.

That was the situation for the first 40 years of the club’s life. Then came the Depression in 1929, and everything changed. There was an immediate decline in membership in the 1930 season and throughout the decade that followed the club edged relentlessly down towards bankruptcy. By 1938 it was burdened with tax arrears and in danger of closing. Maintenance of the courts was also proving unaffordable: 8 of 19 courts had virtually returned to nature, and repairs to the clubhouse were put on hold indefinitely. As a short-term strategy, the land was rented to the Ottawa Archery Club, which almost immediately went bankrupt.

In 1938, the club had a choice between closing or adapting. It chose to adapt, beginning with radical structural changes. That is when it incorporated as the Ottawa Tennis and Lawn Bowling Club. Borrowing the money to pay its taxes, it sold 1,000 shares for \$10 each to raise



The renovations at the Ottawa Tennis and Lawn Bowling Club (OTLBC) club house are ongoing. PHOTO BY MEDE MCATEE



Inside the building now. PHOTO BY MARIA PIERRE NOEL

\$10,000 capital, which it used to buy the lands, goods and chattels of the former club.

That change on its own was not enough to save the club, given that the character of Canadian society was also changing. Even as the Second World War brought thousands and thousands of new civil servants and war workers into Ottawa, the club was failing to attract new members. Clearly, this kind of elite association was no longer sustainable without massive increases in membership fees. Whereas other old Canadian clubs faced with the same challenges doubled down on exclusivity and wealth as a measure for membership, OTLBC chose another path. Having barely survived the war years, it began a period of renewal in the 1960s. There was new investment in facilities and courts and a drive to recruit new members – and especially families – for both tennis and lawn bowling. In order to open its doors to families and to the community at large, the club has consistently kept its membership fees as low as possible. That commitment to openness culminated in 2017, when it changed its legal structure from a private club with shareholders to a non-profit organization.

The club also changed its culture in the 1960s. As it became a more open and affordable institution, it adopted a more informal style as well. Whites were abandoned, and families were encouraged. You never see children in the old photos, but they are a huge part of the membership today, and – far from excluding certain categories

of members on the basis of gender or religion – there is a deliberate drive to increase the diversity of the membership.

OTLBC has come a long way over the years, adapting as it goes to keep pace with changes in the Canadian economy and society. Today, the single most important thing linking the club to its history is the Clubhouse (98 years old this year and heading strongly for its 100th birthday in 2023). OTLBC still had to pinch its pennies in 2021, but it has faced up to its obligations as the steward of one of Ottawa’s important architectural landmarks. With vigorous fund-raising still underway, it is working to ensure that makeshift repairs of the wonderful old Clubhouse are a thing of the past.

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