

RYC ROOTS



A Historical Perspective of the Racine Yacht Club Through Time.

Chapter 10 • January 2016

The Yacht Club Pier System

By Steve Wheeler

In the beginning... There was no Yacht Club pier and dockage around the Club didn't really exist. There were no marinas, no slips, and no convenient dock to tie up to. There was, of course, the north breakwater, which had bollards to tie to, but that was concrete and it could be hard climbing up on it from a boat; it was also a bad place to be in a southeast blow as wave action and surge would damage boats next to it. Most Yacht Club boats were moored in the harbor and that, too, could be a problem when it blew hard out of the south-east or northeast. The results of one of these blows can be seen in the photo. Space was available in places



The old dinghy harbor which, when the photo was taken, seems to have had a lot of water. Bill Richter's utility truck and some Club members can be seen on a spit of land; they appear to be extending it to the small crane to the east. That crane was used to launch small boats. *Ca. 1950s photo courtesy of Arlene Richter Whitt*



Another view of the dinghy harbor. The water is low (compare this with the previous photo) and the little dock that was used to tie small boats to is mostly useless. *1954 photo courtesy of Arlene Richter Whitt*



The boat on the beach south of the river isn't known but may be an "R" Boat. This is the result of a north-east storm. Things like this happened many times. *Ca. 1950s photo courtesy of Arlene Richter Whitt*

along the banks of the Root River, but that was typically industrially based and not geared for recreational use.

What the Club originally did have was a small dinghy harbor comprised of a rip-rap breakwater east of the shoreline; that gave protection when launching small boats. The dinghy harbor eventually filled completely. By the 1950s it became evident that something

else was needed and plans were put in place to build a dock of our own and a preliminary sketch was drawn. It showed a structure that was some 210 feet long with a short "T" at the outboard end. The design finally evolved to an "L" shaped



The dinghy harbor after it filled. Note how low the water is on the north pier. *1958 photo courtesy of Arlene Richter Whitt*

dock with the end of the "L" pointing north; two fingers projected out to the south. The Club began to raise money. Planks were sold for \$5.00 each and one could buy a piling for \$25.00. A steam pile driver was hired and wood pilings were driven (see photo at the top of page 2). As finished, the whole thing cost some \$13,000 and much of the work was done by Club members who donated their time and some of the materials. Plank owners had their names embossed on metal nameplates that were nailed to the planks they bought. Pilings were capped with zinc (or, possibly, lead) sheeting that kept water out of the end grain; buyers of pilings were likewise commemorated with similar nameplates soldered to the caps. To finish things out, a crane used to launch small boats was installed on the north side and lighting was added. Otto Wadewitz had been RYC's Commodore for five consecutive terms beginning in 1933. He, and his family had been significant benefactors of the Racine Yacht Club over the years (Otto is credited with saving it during the depression) and had donated much



Driving wood pilings. 1955 photo courtesy of Arlene Richter Whitt



The Wadewitz pier as finished. Spring, 1956 photo courtesy of Arlene Richter Whitt

time, effort, and money to the Club. In recognition, the dock was named "The Wadewitz Pier" in his honor. Otto had died in 1946, but Mary, his widow (then aged 79), attended the dedication ceremony in 1955.

The pier did have a couple of problems, though. There was no breakwater at its end and storm surge could still cause trouble. The fingers did not have any slips and most of our boats still sat on moorings. It was a start...

By the 1960s it was recognized that something else was needed and in 1967 an extension to the Wadewitz pier was designed by Jim Rooney and Gerry Knop. It would be an expensive undertaking and funding would be a question. The Club board floated the idea of using some money from the Club treasury, securing a loan, and assessing each member the sum of

\$100 yearly (which was not well received by some—there were resignations). After funding methods had finally been approved, permissions to actually build the structure had to be secured from the Public Service Commission and the Water Company (on whose property we were). The Club's lease, which was held

by the Water Company, also had to be extended and when all that was done, construction could begin.

So, in 1967, three river barges were bought from a company in Chattanooga, Tennessee at a total cost of \$9,000. That sum included towing and the barges were brought up the river system to Chicago.

They were moved from there to Racine by the Hanna Marine Company of Lemont, Illinois and temporarily tied up in the Root River. They did not have an easy time there as, after a time, it was found that at least one of them was leaking and required pumping. There was also a storm which broke them loose from the river bank where they were tied and they wound up blocking the river. Much of this happened at night (naturally) and prompted calls to Jim Rooney who had to sort things out on the fly. They were finally put in their intended location by Falcon Marine which towed them out of the river and sank them on a rock, or "cobblestone", base which had already been laid. That was not the end of their troubles, though, as yet another storm (that one from the southeast) broke them

loose again and they had to be reset. Joe Shimkus noted that "it looked like Pearl Harbor!" To ensure the barges stayed in place this time, Falcon pinned them to the bottom with wood pilings. And there they stayed.

Over the years ice had damaged the wood pilings used on the Wadewitz Pier, seriously reducing their diameter at the waterline. Because of this the new extension's pilings were steel tubes that were later filled with concrete; tubes were driven over the wood pilings in the Wadewitz Pier, too, and all of them were capped with concrete. Construction of the extension itself began by adding decking from the end of the old pier out to the barges.

As can be seen from the photo the barges still had their deckhouses in place and when, one morning, people began to arrive at the Club they were greeted by a sign someone had painted



Construction of the pier extension is in progress. Racine Heritage museum photo

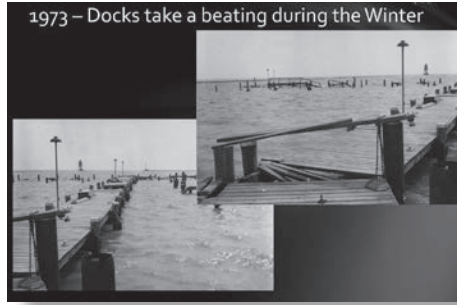
on one of them. It read "Rooney's Reef." Sadly, nobody has ever admitted to that artwork. To ensure that the barges would never move, a breakwater made of stone rip-rap was added and the barges themselves were filled with dredging spoil. The deckhouses, and that offending sign, were removed at the same time. The whole structure was finally completed over that season.



The pier as it was completed. The photo is from the 1974 Racine Yacht Club yearbook cover but was probably taken a couple of years previously, as the old Clubhouse can still be seen near the lower left of the image. The remains of the rip-rap breakwater that formed the old dinghy harbor can be seen too, just to the east of the new Club building.

The old portion of the Wadewitz Pier between the two fingers had been widened by this time, eliminating a serious bottleneck—when launching a boat with the crane a trailer had to be fully backed out before another trailer could be rolled out on the pier. Widening the structure provided a bypass and, in fact, another crane was added there, too. Lighting, power, and water were run out to the end of the extension and, again, much of the work and some of the materials were provided by members who donated their time and talent. The whole thing wound up costing some \$100,000, which was a hefty sum indeed in the 1960s, but it was fully paid off by 1972. Improvements continued over the years. The dock next to the barges that extended out to the north was eventually abandoned and removed because of low water, as was the original “L” on the Wadewitz pier; the finger pier on the new portion was extended to provide more slips.

Maintenance is an ongoing problem with piers such as this. Ice and storms, particularly during times of high water can still create havoc.



1973 – Docks take a beating during the Winter
 Damage after the winter of 1973. Images from the RYC website

Ice can cause pilings to lift but they can be reset using a high volume-low pressure pump (a “trash pump”) to push water down around their bases and wash bottom material out of the way.

This problem has been somewhat reduced by the addition of “Ice Eaters”, submerged 220V, ¾ HP motors spinning 10 inch propellers at about 875 RPM. This keeps the water moving and reduces the formation of ice on the pilings. Changes in water levels also require work: fingers have to be moved up or down if the changes are significant.



Building the mount for the Star crane in 2011. RYC Archives



The crane today. There are now no launching facilities on the pier. Steve Wheeler photo

The construction of the pier extension was not the only improvement to our facilities. In 2001 Star boat sailors banded together and created a new, permanent mount for the launching crane which was moved from the Wadewitz pier. This involved placing a seawall of steel sheeting and building a concrete base on the shoreline.



The floating docks next to the Star crane. *Steve Wheeler photo*



The harbor as it stands today. The surface area is much smaller than it used to be and surge from storms is greatly reduced. Note that there has been significant development in the downtown area since this photo was taken. *Courtesy of the Racine Heritage Museum*

A pair of docks, partially floating, which accommodate boats that have been launched have been installed just south of the new crane location. A public dock further south has also been added (this by the city) near the Rooney Recreation Area; it is just east of the old Walker site and accommodates fishermen and occasional boaters needing a place to tie up temporarily.

Storm damage to boats, which was so much of a problem for so many years has been largely eliminated; the construction of the marina and the landfill to the south has made the surface area of the harbor smaller and storms, particularly from the southeast have much less water to work on. There are also many fewer boats moored out in the harbor so the chances of them breaking loose and careening through the fleet as happened in the October, 1977 storm, shown below, are much, much smaller.



Part of the aftermath of an October, 1977 storm. Damage like this is much less likely now. *RYC archives*

Looking at our pier system and the harbor today, it's hard to imagine what things were like in the past. We have come a long way.



A publication of the RYC Historical Committee, a volunteer group dedicated to the preservation and dissemination of RYC's rich history. This issue was written by Steve Wheeler and Jim Rooney.

