

# **Rowing on Chautauqua Lake – A Sport for the Ages**

**By R. Craig Butler**

**The Post-Journal Guest Contributor**

**The sport of Rowing, generally referred to as Crew when the boat is powered by more than one rower, has a long and interesting history on Chautauqua Lake. This is despite the fact that the current organization sponsoring recreational & competitive rowing on the lake, Chautauqua Lake Rowing Association (CLRA), was founded in late 2005 with its initial season beginning in the Spring of 2006. As CLRA is about to start its fourth boating season, a look back through the past highlights the local history of the sport and its connection with much of the lake activity that we know today.**

**Organized rowing on Chautauqua Lake actually dates back to 1886 when a group of dedicated oarsmen formed the Chautauqua Lake Boat Club. Much of the hope for success of the club was due to its hosting of a regatta of the National Association of Amateur Oarsmen in July, 1887. However, the club did not last long after that event and was disbanded in the spring of 1889. But immediately following, another group sought to reestablish the sport with a much stronger and longer lasting foothold; and the Chadakoin (Rowing) Club was formed. This would prove to be a more enduring organization and become intertwined with much of the lake's later history which is familiar to us today.**

**The founding members of the Chadakoin Club searched many lower-lake locations on which to build their club & boathouse facility. The waterfront site they chose was in Greenhurst adjacent to the Greenhurst Hotel which was being built at that time. The site also bordered Dutch Hollow Creek and Griffiths Point where the first Sheldon Hall would soon be built in 1900. The activities of the Chadakoin Club were closely tied to both Sheldon Hall, where training table meals were taken by the crew members, and the Greenhurst Hotel, where facilities for the Club's social activities were provided. The Greenhurst Hotel's operations lasted only a few years, however, and the Club decided in 1908 to relocate to the opposite shore in the Village of Lakewood where the Lakewood Country Club had been in operation since 1900 (on the site previously occupied by both the Cowing House Hotel (later to become known as the Lakeview House) and the Sterlingworth-Waldemere Hotel). The Lakewood Country Club offered many social and waterfront recreational programs to its members, as well as golf on a nearby course further to the south in the Village, and was willing to provide social function facilities to the Chadakoin Club - much the same as the Greenhurst Hotel had done years earlier. So, in 1908, the**

**Chadakoin Club purchased a waterfront parcel in front of the Lakewood Country Club and built its second club & boathouse.**

**During the first two decades of the Chadakoin Club, the main competitive racing program took the form of a rivalry with a similar organization based at Chautauqua Institution called the Chautauqua Sports Club. That group was made up primarily of collegiate rowers who spent summers at Chautauqua and wanted a summer program for conditioning and competitive racing. The Chautauqua Sports Club rowers were from such notable college rowing programs as Princeton, Yale, Harvard and Cornell. From 1895 to 1917, the two clubs held 20 races in mid-August. They involved rowing shells crewed by four oarsmen and a coxswain with the races taking place alternately at courses on the upper lake between Chautauqua Institution & Mayville and on the lower lake between Greenhurst/Lakewood & Celoron. This competition was a major source of pride for the Chadakoin rowers as they won 13 of the 20 races held. During these years of competition, a large silver punch bowl trophy, engraved with the burges of each club, was inscribed each year with the names of the winning crew. This trophy bowl was donated by Theodore E. Miller (son of Chautauqua Institution co-founder Lewis Miller) and is still on display at the Chautauqua Lake Yacht Club.**

**The year 1917 would prove, however, to be something of a pivotal time in the life of the Chadakoin Club since competitive races were no longer held after that time. Nevertheless, the members carried on with social & recreational rowing programs and remained at their location until a fire destroyed the boathouse facility in 1928. By that time, the Lakewood Country Club had already disbanded in 1919 and the facility sold, becoming the Lakewood Inn through the decade of the 1920's. When the Chadakoin fire occurred, the Lakewood Inn was about to close with the property being sold to the Village of Lakewood in 1929 - becoming the Lakewood Beach and ultimately the Richard O. Hartley Village Park that we know today. So, the Chadakoin Club members, once again, found themselves looking for a new home (their third boathouse facility location). Their search didn't reach far, however. In 1930, they built a new boathouse, also on the Lakewood shoreline, on the site where the Kent House Hotel had stood on Terrace Ave. at the foot of New York & Lakeview Avenues.**

**The Chadakoin Club's relocation to this new facility proved to be another pivotal time in the life of the club and in the history of rowing on Chautauqua Lake. Through the years, sailing had also been a sport sponsored by the Chadakoin Club. But, up to that point, it had been secondary to rowing. During the early 1930's, however, sailing became the primary recreation & sports program of the club. Simultaneously, rowing, having by then survived for several years without the benefit of competitive racing, was in a steady decline. In 1937, the Chadakoin Club's charter was transferred to a form a new organization – The**

**Chautauqua Lake Yacht Club, which has continued successfully at that same location as a primarily sailing & social club up to the present day. In 1939, the remaining rowers in the new club did hold a race on Chautauqua Lake against West Side Rowing Club (founded in 1912 and located in Buffalo, it continues today as one of the nation's preeminent competitive rowing organizations). The West Side rowers won the contest decisively; and this effectively ended organized rowing on Chautauqua Lake for nearly the next seventy years.**

## **Epilogue:**

**In late 2005, a small and dedicated group of individuals headed by Hon. Joseph Gerace Sr., Kevin Sixbey, Lee Stein, Stephen Odrzywolski & Eric Larson put into place the realization of a dream that returned the sport of rowing to the lake – and the Chautauqua Lake Rowing Association (CLRA) was formed. The group has grown steadily during its first three rowing seasons to the present level of just over 50 active rowers going into the Spring, 2009 season. The CLRA sponsors programs for high school, collegiate & adult rowers. Both recreational & open competitive levels are offered from the boathouse located at 18 Jones & Gifford Ave. next to the McCrea Point Park (“the Jamestown Municipal Boat Landing”). The rowing course is on the calm waters of the Chadakoin River and extends upriver to the widening of the lake at Celoron. Travel venues and regatta locations where the CLRA competed in 2008 included: West Side Rowing Club/Buffalo, Saratoga Springs, Pittsford/Rochester, Fairport/Rochester & Pittsburgh.**

**The CLRA offers a focused instructional program for beginning rowers of any age. In fact, the majority of the CLRA's members had no prior rowing experience before signing up for an initial Learn-to-Row session. For 2009, these three-hour events will take place on June 6<sup>th</sup>, July 11<sup>th</sup> & August 15<sup>th</sup>. For a fee of just \$20, participants will receive training on land and have the opportunity to row on the river in one of the 8-person (plus coxswain) rowing shells. For more information, visit the website: [www.rowchautauqua.org](http://www.rowchautauqua.org). CLRA can be reached at 865-8639 or [info@rowchautauqua.org](mailto:info@rowchautauqua.org).**

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