

## **The Western Ontario Fish and Game Protective Association. (History Prepared April 2006 [Draft Version])**

The Western Ontario Fish and Game Protective Association., was founded in 1875 in order to create an organization where sportsmen could meet and share a common love of the outdoors. By 2006, the club and its property are located near the geographic centre of the City of London, but in 1875, the club property was a unique natural area featuring many bird species, a spring fed freshwater pond and numerous species of fish and game.

The club gave its members an opportunity to practice their shared love of hunting, fishing and fellowship, with an eye on promoting and protecting the natural resources of the area. It also allowed them to closely monitor environmental and conservation practices which would allow the association to flourish, yet sustain the fish, wildlife and environment for future generations.

Over 130 years ago, this vision of environmental protection was a very advanced one for its day and it is a credit to the perceptive insight of this group of sports minded citizens. It also established a foundation for saving and promoting the natural resources of the area, a mandate that has been a club tradition throughout its history.

The first club executive for which there are records is listed in an 1896 book on the History of Middlesex County, which reported "the Fish and Game Protective Society was organized in 1875" (pg.207). Later it added, "The Association celebrated the sixth anniversary of the organization on May 17, 1881". It reported that Dr. J.S. Niven was elected president; Dr. W. Woodruff and W.C.L. Gill, vice presidents; David Skirving, treasurer and secretary; S.C. Elliott, John Puddicombe, A. McRae, Thomas S. Smallman, H. Bruce, W.S. Strong and L. McDonald, executive committee. It added that "the Association accomplished many of its objectives and today under the inspector ship of Peter McCann, there is no place in Canada where river fisheries are better protected.

An additional entry added "among the leading members in 1882, when the seventh annual meeting was held, were president D. Niven; secretary, David Skirving, members; W.C.L. Gill, R. Wallace, S. Turner, John Cousins, R.G. Mercer, G. Kelly, F.T. Trebilcock, and C. A. Stone. The story also mentioned that an additional election (1883?), saw the officers elected that year as; president; W.C.L. Gill, first vice president; Dr. W. Woodruff, second vice president; Peter McCann, secretary; D. Skirving, executive committee; John Puddicombe, C.A. Stone, Dr. J.S. Niven, W. Strong, Thomas H. Smallman, R. Wallace, G. Kelly, F. T. Trebilcock and John Cousins. The finance committee was; John Puddicombe, C.A. Stone and F.T. Trebilcock.

The club grounds are situated on the north side of what is now known as Southdale Road East, formerly the old 2nd Concession Road. This property was originally on lots 22 and 23, Concession 1, Westminster Township. A map of the area dated 1878, indicates that the property straddled the lots of F. Wilkins (lot 22) and an unregistered property, (lot 23).

The Westminster Ponds Provincially Significant Wetland complex, which encompasses the Fish and Game Club and pond, is located in the western portion of the Westminster Ponds/Pond Mills Conservation area. This wetland complex also includes the upper reaches of the Dayus Creek Valley and the small pond at the top of this watershed, as well as the Pond Mills area. The Westminster Ponds portion is bounded on the west by Wellington Road and on the south by Southdale Road. The east side borders the Westminster Park subdivision and the north portion abuts the Victoria Hospital Westminster Campus property.

This site is one of the largest natural areas in London and comprises over 750 acres (300 hectares) 4.8 miles (3 km) long, by 2.5 miles (1.5 km) wide. There are 6 major ponds and a few smaller ones which dot the landscape. In spite of the heavy pressure on the area due to its proximity to a large urban population, it still features swamp, marsh and bog sections and is a significant wetland area that has been afforded the highest of protections by the Province.

The slopes that surround the ponds are remnants of the glacial moraines that formed them. The surrounding areas are very wooded and provide a scenic backdrop to the expanse of the ponds, in particular, when autumn brings out the fall colours of the maples, oaks and tamaracks. The natural area outside the Fish and Game Club property is managed by the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority, on behalf of the City of London. The UTRCA staff maintain the walking areas by removing hazardous trees, repairing the boardwalks, decks and bridges, updating and installing signs and trail markers, protecting sensitive plants, cleaning up litter and generally enforcing rules to help safeguard this sensitive property. These actions not only help maintain the property around the club, but also help create a larger protected area that acts as a buffer zone yet complements the club property.

The ponds including the Fish and Game pond, also known as South Walkers Pond, or on occasion, Lukings Pond, are remnants of the last glacier when the ice masses left depressions called kettle depressions. They date to approximately 14,000 years ago and are at the easterly edge of the Ingersoll moraine. When the glaciers melted, the kettle depressions remained and filled with the melt-water, forming the ponds that still exist.

These cold melt-water ponds created small unique climate zones with vegetation generally found much further south. Some species found around the Fish and Game pond are; pitcher-plants, sundew, leather

leaf, tamarack, orchids and ferns. Tree species abound with sugar, red and silver maple, American elm, red and white oak, shagbark hickory, basswood, flowering dogwood and cherry and represent tree species found in the northern limits of the Carolinian forest.

A survey of the area conducted in the 1980's, found 232 species of birds along with 20 species of mammals, 12 species of amphibians and 7 species of reptiles. It also identified an amazing 757 plant species, many of which are very fragile.

The ponds also provide excellent conditions for many species of insects and numerous varieties of butterflies. The adjacent forests are popular nesting sites for a large variety of birds including many species of warbler, Canada geese, mallards, wood ducks and both Green Herons and Great Blue Herons. The sounds of traffic on nearby roadways (when the wind blows from the west and south-west) are often the only reminder that Club members and their guests are not on an isolated lake somewhere in the north.

The unique character of the area of the ponds, was first described in the diary of one of the officers who accompanied Lt. Governor Simcoe on a trek to Windsor in 1793. He wrote about the interesting place they camped on February 4, 1793. The area to the east known as Pond Mill's, was settled in 1815, long before London was founded and the cemetery was established in 1825. It is not difficult to see that the Fish and Game Club and its pond are a part of this distinct area and the club has managed to maintain its relationship to its surroundings for its entire 131 year history.

During this time, the purpose of the Western Ontario Fish and Game Protective Association has been to promote protection of our environment and our natural resources and encourage conservation. The club pledge which is repeated by all members at the start of every meeting is;

"I give my pledge as a Canadian  
to save and faithfully defend from waste,  
the natural resources of my country,  
its soil and minerals,  
its water, forests, air and wildlife  
and to obey all fish and game laws".

The club membership is actively engaged in working towards the goals expressed in this pledge and one of the principle mandates of the club is to promote true sportsmanship by the protection, breeding propagation and conservation of game and fish.

Many of the earlier accounts of club activities are a product of the memories of earlier members. The club did not always have a permanent facility for their meetings, so they would meet at various halls throughout the city. Early narratives tell of how Charles Selby served as president for 9 years and during this time he held meetings in various halls in London. Some members who helped provide oral history were; Charles Selby, Jack David, Norm Bohanon, J.A. 'Bert' Woodley, Orville Boxhall and Jack Livermore.

Conservation practices that the club sponsored over the years have included;  
tree planting in London and area,  
stocking trout including brown trout in the lower Medway, Caddy Creek and at Fanshawe.

Bass were introduced into the north and south branches of the Thames River and pickerel were released in the lower Thames River at Delaware. All of these measures were sponsored by the club and carried out with the hard work of the club members.

At one time, club members participated in a Carp Derby each spring which helped provide fishing before the season opened. The club also acquired fishing rights at Pond Mills east of the club and also stocked the pond at the Arva Mills for the use of the public and members of the club. Pheasants were purchased and released in the area around the club and pheasant eggs were distributed to local farmers who used their brood hens to hatch and raise them so they could also be released around the ponds.

Continued market hunting with no limits had seriously depleted the cottontail rabbit population in the county. As a result, the club petitioned the Ontario government to pass a 6 rabbit limit and a restriction against selling them. Middlesex was one of only 3 counties to adopt and enforce this law in the province. On the other hand, an overpopulation of jack rabbits was causing an environmental problem and the club was instrumental in organizing drives to help reduce their numbers and reduce the threat to the habitat.

As the years progressed, club members became aware of how pollution was affecting local waterways, as there was little regard for what was being dumped into them. Since that time, the club has worked at promoting the cleanup of local waterways and providing instructions for the public to help prevent further damage to our water resources. Each one of these projects was carried out by the club and its members as an example of a public service that would benefit everyone.

In 1940, the Fish and Game Club developed an interest in an organization which is now known as the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters. An article from the London Free Press reported that representatives from the club attended an early meeting of the Federation that was held at the Hotel London. While no definite date exists to pinpoint the date when the club became affiliated, Jack

Livermore, a past president of the club, was a zone delegate in 1946, which would be at least 60 years this year (2006). In 1971, the club hosted the annual meeting of the Federation of Anglers and Hunters which was held at the Holiday Inn in London. The theme of the convention that year was "Sport fisheries management in Ontario".

Early records indicate that part of the current property was purchased in 1910. A story in the London Free Press from 1948, indicated this purchase was made in 1923, although the earlier date would seem to be more accurate for the club, given the early date that it was founded. A further purchase was made in 1925, which likely was the purchase referred to in the newspaper story. The last portion was purchased in 1946.

Some time after 1925, club members constructed a bathhouse and boathouse which served the club until 1946. That year, members purchased 2 war surplus army huts which were moved to their present site. It took a few years to complete the renovations that joined them into the large clubhouse still in use today and much of the hard work was completed by club members. One of the members remembered for their hard work and dedication, was the late Bill Leigh who put in countless hours at this task. A photo story in the London Free Press of May 17, 1948, dealt with the work being done to complete the clubhouse project. The story went on to add that the Fish and Game Club owned 15 acres (6 Hectares) and that the clubhouse consisted of a "former servicemen's cookhouse and barrack hut".

The completed clubhouse was 68' long with an additional 12' on the front for use as a cloakroom. A 75' rifle range was being built in the basement. It also explained that for the last 25 years (since 1923) the pond "has been stocked with; trout, bass and pickerel by the association" and " the association executive has placed a catch limit on the pond to stop exploitation of fishing". Featured in the photograph and story were; Jack Davis, president, Wilbur Luce; secretary, Mel Brock; chairman of the building committee and member Charles Hale.

In 1948, members, ever aware of the advancing city boundaries, worked on establishing a preserve for birds and small game, located near the rear of the new clubhouse. Permission was given by Westminster Hospital authorities for the club to use part of their lands for this project. The operation was under the guidance of Bob Ramsay and Curly Arscott; president. Included in the plan, were tree planting, building brush piles, planting multi-floral roses for cover and the release of pheasants.

The most recent addition to the clubhouse was carried out in 1962, with men's and ladies washrooms being installed at the south end of the building. The president at the time was Tom Lee. Additional improvements were carried out in 1966, when the pond was chemically treated in order to remove the large quantity of coarse fish that had become established over the years. The club president Tony Powell

supervised this project which was carried out under the direction of officers from the Department of Lands and Forests in Aylmer. The pond was then restocked with game and pan fish in order to reach a more natural balance and better reflect its original state.

The club has offered safe hunter training since 1957 and in that time, over 1,000 students have graduated from the program. All of the instructors have been club members and have included; Bill Lidiard, Sandy Sanders, Stan Richardson, Curly Arscott, Art Boyle, Ray Hodgson, Frank Potter, Harry Livermore, Bill Smith and Jack Livermore, Tom General and Phil Gingrich. The club also offered the rifle range in the basement for firearm instruction as well, allowing junior and senior members to compete in the Dominion Marksmanship Association target competition. This author recalls competing for the Bronze, Silver and Gold pins in standing, kneeling and prone categories. Two of the outstanding junior marksmen at the club were Lynn Ball and Jim Leggett. The club also provided 22 caliber rifles for loan and sold ammunition to members. Eventually the range could not be used, as it needed expensive upgrades in order to meet newer safety standards and they were not considered practical. Later the range was made available for archery practice.

The Department of Lands and Forests used the facilities of the clubhouse in order to conduct hunter safety examinations and it has always been available to them whenever required. Hunter safety courses are still offered through the club and at present are offered once a month to all interested parties. At present, courses are being given in February, March, April, May, September, October, and November.

Since 1948, dances have been held in the clubhouse and over the years many club members have given freely of their time in order to assist at these functions. The club offered a Sportsman of The Month draw which was established by Harry Livermore in 1958 and over the years, it provided much revenue for the organization. It has now been replaced with a draw held each month at the general meeting and this draw remains as an important fund raiser.

During the 1940's the club offered various workshops in order help members acquire skills in areas such as fly tying, winter hunting techniques, bait and fly casting methods and other crafts. Recognizing the value of these programs, the Recreation department of the former London Public Utilities Commission (P.U.C.) took over many of these functions and now offers them throughout the city. From time to time however, the club will offer specialized programs, such as rod building, to any interested members.

The Fish and Game Club was incorporated as a non-profit organization in 1954, and the first officers were; Jack Livermore, president; Curly Arscott; recording secretary; Doug Woodley, secretary; Freeman McLeod, treasurer and Norm Goodey, executive member. The club continues to be a self-supporting group. The club also provides an apartment at the back of the building for the on site managers. The club

also offers its pond facilities to the London Fire Department for scuba diving training and welcomes visits by groups and organizations that share interests which parallel that of the club.

The executive along with club members, continually work to fulfill conservation objectives. They carry out regular stocking programs in the club pond, perform lake level maintenance and continually monitor water quality. They also work closely with both the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority and the Ministry of Natural Resources to ensure that proper conservation guidelines are met and achieved.

The Fish and Game Club is involved in many activities that take place during the year. They include numerous fishing derbies (Trout, Bass and ice fishing) tackle swap in February for club members and other invited groups. They have hosted a very popular Family Day every summer since the 1960's. The safe boating course is taught under the auspices of the Canadian Coast Guard. This course recognizes the importance of boater safety and includes course instruction and testing for the Canadian Coast Guard Pleasure Craft Operators card.

In late May or June, the club holds a small flea market on the property where all types of goods are offered for sale. At different times during the spring, summer and fall, club members participate in general clean-up and work parties to keep the grounds in top shape. Continual maintenance is also required to keep the docks and walkways safe and in good condition for the benefit of members and their guests. The club also maintains a boat rack, so members have a place to keep canoes, rowboats and other fishing and pleasure craft, although gasoline motors are not allowed.

The club presently sponsors a team in the George Bray Hockey League and hosted a Boy Scout troop for many years. The clubhouse has long been available for rent for dances, receptions, parties, church services, meetings and other special events and features a full kitchen and wet bar which is tended by club members. Members and other interested parties can also purchase WOF&GPA merchandise including jackets, tee-shirts, sweatshirts, hats and other items that bear the Western Ontario Fish and Game Protective Association Crest.

Special events are held for the children and include a special breakfast with Santa and an Easter Saturday breakfast. Other events such as Euchre parties and dinners including the popular Jiggs Dinner, are among some of the functions offered for adults. In addition, fishing derbies in both the winter and summer are held for members of all ages.

The club also sends out a monthly newsletter. It is offered via the mail, though the club WEB site ([www.wofgpa.org](http://www.wofgpa.org)), or can be sent to members' e-mail in order to make use of modern technology and save on postage, printing and paper costs. The newsletter includes an events calendar, a president's

message, executive and committee updates, news and views, conservation tips, a swap shop and an advertising page.

The principle fundraiser for the Fish and Game Club is the annual Christmas tree sale. It has been held for over 10 years and is staffed by volunteers from the membership. They offer a number of different species of short and long needled trees and the lot is set up on the lawn at the front of the clubhouse. Over 800 trees were sold for the 2005 season and the profits from this sale fund many of the important conservation projects that are carried out each year.

The executive for 2006 for the Western Ontario Fish and Game Protective Association is; President; Stan Gibbs, 1st Vice-president; Don Colborne, 2nd Vice-president, Tom McGill, Secretary; Teresa Couture, Treasurer; Steve Couture, Immediate past president; Ron Earle, Directors; Lawrence Lainchbury, Gord McCurdy and Past President; Gloria McDonald. The committees include; entertainment, house, grounds, ponds, welfare, boat racks, membership, newsletter, public relations, political and environmental research, Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters and safe hunter training and boat safety. General meetings are held the 2nd Thursday of each month except July and August and Executive meetings are held on the fourth Thursday of the month. The Club is located at 790 Southdale Road East, London, N6E 1A8 and the phone number is 681-2370.

The Western Ontario Fish and Game Protective Association is one of the oldest, continually operating non-profit associations in the Province of Ontario. It has existed for over 130 years in the face of increasing pressure from an ever expanding city and the encroaching population of an urban community, yet still has been able to maintain its unique woodland environment and beautiful, delicate pond during this entire time. That it has been able to accomplish all of this in spite of the odds it has faced, stands as a testament to the work that has been carried out over the years by the many dedicated members that have given so much to keep it the treasure that it has become.

*Document Written BY: Brian Logie (April 2006)*

*Additional Information Provided BY: Steve Couture (April 2006)*