

History of The Wardroom Club

Shortly before the turn of the century a group of gentlemen from a Reserve activity called the Naval Brigade formed a dining club which was to meet once a month in Boston. They wanted this club to have an atmosphere as much like that of the Navy wardroom (with a wine mess included) as was possible ashore. Most of the members were veterans of the Spanish-American war, but they all shared a love of the sea and strong interest in the Navy. The leader in organizing this club was Captain John W. Weeks, destined later to become Congressman, Senator and Secretary of War, and it was his thought to develop a meeting place for reminiscence of Navy experiences and for the discussion of things nautical. The Naval Brigade was a very active part of the Massachusetts Volunteer Militia and it had high esprit de corps. Its members affectionately nicknamed themselves "the webfooted volunteers" since many of their training exercises were in the nature of landing operations on the islands of Boston Harbor.

The dining club was soon given the name of The Wardroom Club and prospered from the start under the strong leadership of Captain Weeks. The Club was incorporated on February 14, 1902 at which time its regular meetings were being held at the Wharf Rats Club overlooking Boston Harbor. Soon, however, The Club determined to have quarters of its own, and space was leased in the building at No. 6 Rowe's Wharf.

Active participation in the Naval Brigade continued during this period, and the old frigate MINNESOTA was the training ship from which landing parties sallied forth to assault "Deer Island's Bloody Heights." On the successful conclusion of a typical landing exercise the officers would repair to the MINNESOTA for discussion and refreshments. The song, "The Field and Staff" (to the tune of O'Houlihan), describes it as follows:

"Oh, the Minnesota's all lit up and filled with wine and song,
For the Field and Staff have come aboard,
To gather around the Tables with the friends they've brought along
And enjoy themselves with one accord."

Thus, when the MINNESOTA was scrapped, it was indeed appropriate that certain furnishings were requisitioned from her to fit out a replica of the wardroom of an old-time ship. Additional nautical flavor was added to the decor by a miniature mast and yardarm, which carried signal flags spelling out messages of welcome and good cheer to gentlemen coming aboard.

Those who have visited these rooms describe them as a truly interesting historical exhibit. This atmosphere, with the tang of salt air in the nostrils, was the inspiration for the spinning of yarns and sea stories. One of the most prized possessions was "a bureau none ignores." This item is described in the song as follows:

"Its drawers are three and you'll agree
they are different quite from yours,
For you can make a thousand tries
but you can't find any flies
on our Naval Bureau Drawers."

In addition to Captain Weeks, some of the other founders are perhaps best described in the "Christmas Song" of December 6, 1910, sung to the air of "Any Little Girl That's A Nice Little Girl Is The Right Little Girl For Me." Judge Charles T. Davis was an eminent jurist and first Judge of the Land Court. He and Dr. Cobb, described as an amateur yachtsman, were remembered in verse thusly:

"Charles Davis too will boss the crew, to the post of mate he's risen,
So any little boat that can carry Cobb and float, is the right little boat for his'n."

Henry N. Sweet who was a raconteur of note as well as a prominent financier, frequently recalled old times. Of him it was said:

"But don't take any stock for it's rumored around the block they found a ticker tape worm in Sweet."

He is also pleasantly remembered for the frequent gala affairs he put on at his country estate in Dover. In addition, he made his private nine-hole golf course available to officers stationed in the area. This boyhood friend of Mr. Weeks was one of the "Faithful Ten" who had been so instrumental in his elections to Congress.

One member of the Medical profession seems to have been appropriately named, and another song says about him:

"Oh, you ought to see how Dr. Cutts."

Concerning Dr. Eldridge, surgeon of the original brigade who must have been more of a general practitioner, it was recorded:

"So any little kid, no matter where it's hid is the right little kid for him."

Perhaps the most distinguished appearing of the charter organizers was James P. Parker who sported a splendid red beard. He had the dual distinction of becoming both Commodore and Brigadier General.

While serving as a Governor's Aide he was at the same time Adjutant General of the Volunteer Militia and head of the Naval Brigade. One can perhaps get an insight to the character of this illustrious gentleman by the following rhyme, composed with him in mind:

"By the girls he is adored in his gold lace and his sword,
Oh, the vision makes them swim.
He's made all officers, I've heard, change their lace to match his beard,
A better color scheme to win."

Captain Daniel Goodridge must have been an outstanding leader for these words were written of him:

"For fighting is the trade of our Scrappy Dan's brigade, on sea as well as land."

During the course of an evening someone would always start the chant to the effect that:

"John, John, John W. Weeks is a great big burly captain"

and all hands would join in. At the proper time a vociferous shout was raised, "All Stand Up" and they would drink a toast to Weeks, or, if he were not present, to his portrait.

In 1922, the club published a book of popular and patriotic songs of the era, that included such notables as the "Ward Room Song" which began,

"Come all you merry mariners and sit down in a ring,
And as we pass around the glass let every fellow sing;
Tis not to ladies fair tonight we raise our chorus strong,
But swell our throats with ringing notes,
"May the Ward Room Club live long!"

and ended with,

"Then seize the present hour, my boys, and cram it full of joy;
To song and jest give keenest zest without the least alloy;
Tomorrow none can call his own, tonight we're here and dry;
The Ward Room lives; it always will; we know the reason why."

Then there was the well known "Fifteen Years Ago" in which one stanza read,

" Since that day we've gathered fame,
All hail the Ward Room Club;
Now all men our deeds proclaim,
Long live the Ward Room Club"

One of the most popular specialties of this era was a Wardroom Club favorite entitled the "Whizz-Fish." This was consistently rendered by Robert (Pie) Blake and is still popular at dinners today. Arthur Blake, who at one time held the exalted position of "Skipper," often sang "Tim Doolin." On a particular occasion a mock court martial was held with Judge Davis presiding. A member was accused of disrespect towards the group. He was fortunately acquitted after appropriate accusations and denials on his part.

The members were seated at a long table with guests interspersed between them to foster the spirit of conviviality. Many tales unfolded at these early meetings, such as the "Buffalo" story, narrated by James D. Colt. It is interesting to

note that the stories told by one of the loyal New Bedford contingent was later popularized by "Chic Sale." A few of these were so well told that they were repeated year in and year out.

It was on a cold rainy night in January 1915, when for some unknown reason, humorist and critic Robert Benchley was invited to the first dinner of the year. Disguised as Stanton Abbott, personal secretary to Josephus Daniels, then Secretary of the Navy, Benchley maintained a low profile until the dinner had been served, following which he delivered a speech on "democratizing" the Navy, in which he had all the members in attendance frozen in their tracks, until after 10 or 15 minutes someone managed to see through it all as a practical joke. The members collapsed with laughter and Benchley was invited to all meetings thereafter during his stay in Boston.

These early dinners were catered affairs put on by the Chef of Louis' Restaurant which was located in an alleyway behind the Tremont Theatre. Old Joe or Emil would come over to serve these full course repasts and sometimes Louis himself would come just for the occasion.

During the period up to World War 1, the diners numbered about twenty-five to thirty at each affair. Most of their names may be found on the pay rosters in die archives of the Adjutant General of Massachusetts. It was considered a virtual obligation for each member to attend the monthly dinner. Massachusetts was the first state to organize, train and send a Naval unit to report for Spanish-American War duty. It is apparent that the "esprit de corps" of the Naval Brigade was consistently and extraordinarily superior.

The main objective of the Club was to be of service to the Navy, and it was accomplished by serious discussion and talks on Naval subjects. This is not to say that nary a smile was e'er to be seen for, on the contrary, it appears that the Senior Members of the Group would convene shortly after the sun rose over the yardarm. The afternoon would then be taken up with a hand or two of cards accompanied by spirits at one's pleasure and leisure. When the junior members arrived in the evening for dinner it is reliably reported that some of the Elders were in fine fettle due to the prolonged "Happy Hour." By the time dinner was to be served, all hands presumably wore a ruddy glow and were willing to perform, as called upon, in the manner dictated by custom. A characteristic feat in this connection would be namely, "sing a song, tell a joke or do a strip." There is no record of anyone's having performed in the latter manner. However, one regular officer was threatened with this fate on a certain evening because he attended in full mess dress. He was absolved from this ignominy by telling a story which was deemed acceptable to those present.

During the course of World War I a few members formed a "Splinter group" in Washington and held dinners there. In May of 1922 such a group, headed by James O. Porter, met at dinner and were joined by "Captain John" who was then in Congress. A song written for the occasion expressed the following desire:

"Tonight let's slip our cable
And drift off down the stream
Where Congress is a fable
And Senate probes a dream."

This group met on frequent occasions, as did a similar group many years later during World War II. These splinter groups might be referred to as Annexes since the regular meetings in Boston continued as usual.

During the first few years after World War I a general apathy developed toward the armed services, and the Navy, probably more than the others, felt these effects as well as those of the London Disarmament Treaty. Nevertheless, the Wardroom Club continued to meet regularly in its own quarters at No. 6 Rowe's Wharf.

Natural attrition in the numbers of the Spanish War veterans was a little more than offset by World War I veterans; officers from the Sixth Battle Squadron, the Queenstown destroyers, the North Sea Mine fleet and the many other activities of the naval establishment.

All went well with The Wardroom Club throughout the booming 1920's, but after the market crash in 1929, some of the members, including quite a few of the most loyal old-timers from the Spanish-American War, found the going pretty hard. To these the annual dues of \$20 plus the cost of the dinners became increasingly burdensome with the result that the membership slowly dwindled, and it became a struggle to keep the Club's financial status out of red ink. It was obvious that this membership could no longer afford to maintain its quarters at No. 6 Rowe's Wharf for only eight dinner meetings a year. By good fortune, according to Mr. Clifford Newell, a steward at the winter quarters of the old Boston Yacht Club at #5 Rowe's Wharf, Lt. Skyler Dillon was also the secretary of the yacht club. Thus, arrangements were soon made to transfer the Wardroom Club memorabilia, dear to the hearts of the members, next door to No. 5 Rowe's Wharf. Sadly, the membership abandoned its own club rooms, but were eager to use part of the Boston Yacht Club's quarters with its sweeping view of Boston harbor.

That was in 1932, and the "cabin" on the fourth floor was renamed the "Wardroom," to the delight of the Wardroom Club membership. At the same time, the Club made a new and valued friend in Clifford Newell, who served the Wardroom Club faithfully for the next twenty-five years, while continuing as the Boston Yacht Club's steward.

Entertainment at the meetings during these years always retained a nautical flavor. The big windows of the rooms of the Boston Yacht Club provided a panorama of the naval, merchant, and local ship traffic, as these vessels persisted in their perpetual perambulations about the waterfront. But all good things come to an end, and the Wardroom Club fared no better when these quarters, in turn, fell upon difficult times, and had to be given up.

On Wednesday, January 20, 1965, The Club held its last rendezvous at the old station, 5 Rowe's Wharf. The speaker was Dr. Norris Hoyt, Professor of English at St. George's School, Newport, Rhode Island. "Norry" gave an illustrated talk on "Power and Sail, Old and New." On this occasion, this old friend of The Club made his presentation in the inestimable fashion of the proven raconteur, rarely matched and always in his illimitable manner.

His disclosure on that memorable evening pertained to round-trip sail to Scotland and the tremendous U.S. breakthrough in the 12-meter design. One hundred and five members turned out for this last meeting at the Boston Yacht Club Station.

The next four meetings were held at the New England Diving School Barge at 270 Atlantic Avenue, Boston. At the Annual Meeting on May 19, Mr. and Mrs. Clifford A. Newell were honored for their thirty years' service to members of this Club. They were presented with a silver tray and a check as a gift from the members of the Club.

Beginning with the October 1965 meeting, The Club met at the Cambridge Boat Club at Gerry's Landing on the Charles River, which proved to be a most satisfactory meeting place for about five years, although it became necessary to place in storage our relics and souvenirs as we took our departure from tidewater.

The early 1970's became rather turbulent years for our meeting place, as we attempted to return to the good influence of salt water, by experimenting with Dom's and S.S. Peter Stuyvesant harborside restaurants as well as the Officer's Club in the First Coast Guard District Headquarters at Constitution Wharf; all of which proved to be temporary when we returned to the Boat Club. But the search succeeded when in October 1977 Club meetings were shifted to the Constitution Museum on the site of the Boston Naval Shipyard in Charlestown, adjacent to the USS Constitution and its berth, administered now by the National Park Service. This brought a well-earned renaissance, welcomed particularly by those whose memory and endurance extended back to the days of twelve and more years ago with the appealing prospect of the Boston waterfront. Then in October 1981, the Constitution Museum's need for more space in which to display its collection compelled yet another relocation. Fortunately, however, the National Park Service gave The Club permission to hold our meetings at the former Navy Officers' Club, only a stone's throw from the Constitution Museum. This latest move brought The Club to a site which holds fond memories of happy occasions for many Club members.

The men of the Spanish War Navy are gone now, as are all but a few of those who served in World War I. But the same spirit as in the earlier years prevails among the present members, who served in World War II, and the Korean and Vietnam Conflicts, the two wars in Iraq, and the peacetime Navy. After all, naval officers, like the sea, don't change much as the years roll by.

The hard days were now past, and the recent change in quarters and orientation had resulted in a practical arrangement that worked well until the early 21st century. Once again, The Wardroom Club had secured quarters at the water's edge of our proud Boston Harbor.

Our present membership, which has grown dramatically in recent years, now exceeds 400, including no less than two medal of Honor recipients, and is composed of men who have held commissions in the Navy, the Marine Corps and the Coast Guard, either reserve or regular, as well as the Merchant Marine. There are also a limited number of Associate Members from the Army and Air Force, as well as a few whose civilian pursuits or interests closely ally them with the Navy, as well as active service guests.

Entertainment at the meetings still has a nautical flavor. An hour or so of social conviviality begins the evening, a time for greeting old friends and becoming acquainted with new members, members' guests, and when they are present as guests of The Club, officers from Naval ships visiting Boston.

Immediately following dinner it is customary for those who wish to tell "sea stories" to be called upon to further enliven the proceedings. Then, in a more serious vein, a guest speaker, or on occasion, one of our members will offer us his presentation on a subject relating to the Navy, maritime affairs, or the sea. Two meetings depart from the format of guests and speakers, and are limited to members and nominees for membership. These are the Christmas meeting in

December and the Annual Meeting in May, when the festivities of the evening center on conviviality, grog, and sea stories.

Meetings normally are scheduled for the third Wednesday from October through May, although on September 21, 1966, The Wardroom Club held its first Ladies' Night on board the battleship MASSACHUSETTS in Fall River, Massachusetts. Seventy-five officers with their ladies made this a most memorable occasion in the Club's history. The success of this event resulted in the Ladies' Night becoming an occasional affair, and subsequent Ladies' Nights have taken place at the new John F. Kennedy Library, at the New England Aquarium, and, appropriately, afloat on Boston Harbor, and most recently at the Corinthian Yacht Club in Marblehead, the town widely believed to be the birthplace of the American Navy.