

THE FISH THAT GOT AWAY

By Joe Moran

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Fishing clubs for high society American sportsmen were a phenomenon in the late 19th Century. Two very early fishing clubs included Philadelphia's Schuylkill Fishing Company and Cincinnati's own Angling Club. The Schuylkill Fishing Company founded in 1732 in Philadelphia is the oldest sporting club in America as well as the rest of the world. It was originally was limited to 25 members and it is still in operation today. Cincinnati also can lay claim to forming one of the earliest fishing clubs in the United States as well. The Cincinnati Angling Club was organized in 1830 and was frequently mentioned in both John Stuart Skinner's Turf Register and William Trotter Porter's Spirit of the Times.

American sportsmen assembled prior to the Civil War aiming to protect fish and game, but it was in the 1870's that upscale fishing clubs for sportsmen became a national trend. By 1880 there were several hundred sports-themed clubs in America. As the number of participants

in these clubs grew – so did the number of advertisers marketing to these sportsmen. Dozens of sporting periodicals emerged on the scene in the 1870s including: The American Sportsman in 1871, Forest and Stream in 1873, the American Field in 1874, and the American Angler in 1881.

By the 1880s the railroads had allowed for more people to participate in sport fishing clubs. The railroads tapped into this sporting market by printing travel brochures to fishing destinations that tied into their routes. In 1910 the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad went so far as to offer a \$20 gold piece to any fly fisherman who caught a rainbow trout weighing ten pounds or more along their line.

Post-Civil War sportsmen who were concerned about the destruction of good sporting grounds simply formed their own private preserves. The fishing clubs of New York included the Long Island's Southside Sportsmen's Club established in 1866 and the Bisby Club in the Adirondacks established in 1877. The Southside Sportsmen's Club of Great River, Long Island, was within 50 miles of New York City. It was a large preserve of 3,475 acres with a clubhouse and 103 male-only

members. It had a spring-fed trout stream, and a pheasant & pigeon shooting preserve. Some of the members of the day included, Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, Generals Grant and Sherman, Teddy Roosevelt, William Vanderbilt, August Belmont and Adalai Stevenson.

The sport fishing clubs in Pennsylvania in addition to the Schuylkill Fishing Company included the Blooming Grove Club established in 1871, and the South Fork Fishing Club established near Pittsburgh in 1879. The main focus on my paper tonight is on the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club of St. Michael, Pennsylvania.

The club was located just east of Pittsburgh and had 61 listed members on its roster. Membership was limited to 100 individuals and the annual membership fee was \$800. The club was a retreat for wealthy industrialists, merchants and bankers from Pittsburgh. Nearly 160 acres formed the preserve including a deer park surrounding the lake which was two miles long and one mile wide and 60 feet deep. The Pennsylvania Railroad ran alongside South Fork and 1,000 black bass arrived to stock the lake via special tank car from Lake Erie.

One of the key elements of the club was its makeshift dam and abandoned reservoir. The dam was 72 feet high and 900 feet long. The lake had originally been constructed not as a recreational facility, but as a way to provide water for the section of the Pennsylvania Canal between central Pennsylvania and Pittsburgh. This dam was designed by Edward Pearson, who lacked any engineering credentials. Frequent downpours resulted in the dam needing serious repairs. These repairs were usually patched up with mud and straw.

The club's accommodations included 16 cottages and a three story clubhouse building around man-made Lake Conemaugh in Cambria County, Pennsylvania. The 47 room clubhouse had a dining room that seated 150 guest and it was in this facility that most of the members were lodged. A boardwalk ran the length of the developed property between the lake, cottages and the clubhouse. The club's fleet included 50 rowboats and canoes, sailboats, and two steam yachts. There was an annual regatta, theatricals and musical performances as well.

On May 31, 1889, ten years after its founding, the list of members was

published. *“It was a most unostentatious affair by contrast to such watering spots of the time as Newport, Cape May or the lavish new lakeside resort in New York’s Tuxedo Park. There was no opulence. There were no liveried footmen, no Tyrolean-hatted gamekeepers such as at Tuxedo Park, no “cottage” architecture to approach the likes of Newport. There was not even a comparison to be made, unless the South Fork group was to be measured by the per capita worth of its members – or the industrial and financial power they wielded – which, everything considered, was often the way such things were measured. On that basis the little resort on Lake Conemaugh was right in the same league.”*

Steel was the common thread of the 60 members of the South Fork Fishing Club. This was an age when railroads were being built, skyscrapers created and the Navy had just placed its first order for American steel for ship armor in 1887. Undoubtedly the most influential member of this western Pennsylvania club was Andrew Carnegie. Long before the South Fork Fishing Club had been conceived, Carnegie had a hunting retreat named Cresson in this part of Cambria where he spent a good deal of time. It was his only real home in

Pennsylvania since he was now spending a lot of time in New York and Scotland. Some of Carnegie's influential business partners visited Cresson which was right along the Pennsylvania Railroad line and decided to form a fishing club.

Three of Carnegie's partners and fellow club members tied in to his steel industry were: Henry Clay Frick, Henry Phipps, Jr. and Philander Chase Knox. In 1886 Henry Clay Frick was induced to sell a half interest in his company to Andrew Carnegie. He later formed a partnership with Andrew Carnegie and U.S. Steel was created. Henry Phipps, Jr. was the financial wizard and Chairman of Carnegie, Phipps & Company and by 1889 he was in the top three lists of the most important men in the steel industry. Philander Chase Knox was the Carnegie Steel Company's chief legal counsel as well as personal legal counsel for Andrew Carnegie and Henry Phipps, Jr. He was instrumental in the appointment of Pittsburgh banker Andrew Mellon as Secretary of the Treasury.

One prominent club member who was not directly in the steel industry was Andrew W. Mellon. He was in the banking business and financed

Pittsburgh's rapid growth. He went on to become Secretary of the Treasury, serving under Harding, Coolidge and Hoover. At one time he was on the board of directors of 60+ companies. It was Mellon who lent money to Henry Clay Frick to invest in coal. Coincidentally Frick and Mellon became fast friends and traveled to Europe together and engaged in various partnerships. Nonetheless, they never called each other anything but Mister Frick and Mister Mellon.

The South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club had an unfortunate occurrence. One day in May 31, 1889 there were 12 members present at Lake Conemaugh early in the summer season. An extended period of heavy rain caused the lake's dam burst and 20 million gallons of water rushed down to the town of Johnstown, Pennsylvania. In all 2,209 Johnstown, Pennsylvania citizens perished and \$17 million in damage was done - America's worst flood ever.

The bursting of the dam proved to be the demise of the club. Several of the flood victims of Johnstown, Pennsylvania went up to the club and vandalized the property as an act of revenge. No other natural disaster to date was so well covered by the media. As one might expect a lot of

attention was given to denouncing the sportsman's lake. As a courtesy most of the newspapers did not mention the club members by name and the club was allowed to keep its anonymity.

Soon after the Johnstown flood, the club folded in 1904 and the property was sold. In 1907 The Maryland Coal Company built a mine 1500 feet south of the club. The cottages were used by the workers and today only seven of the original 16 cottages survive. The courts declared the dam's failure an Act of God, which was beneficial to the club's reputation.

After the Johnston Flood, the club contributed to the relief effort. Over 1,000 blankets were donated to the victims by club members. Several of the members served on relief committees to aid the victims.

Henry Clay Frick donated thousands of dollars to the flood relief cause. Andrew Carnegie donated \$10,000 to build a library. In turn the residents of Johnstown gave Carnegie a hero's welcome. Today, this very library houses the Johnstown Flood Museum.

The theme of this evening's budget is the one that got away. Sportsmen

hear a lot about “the fish that got away”. The South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club is a rare instance of a fishing club that got away - got swept away in a matter of minutes in the celebrated Johnstown Flood.