

The History of the Garrison Curling Club



It began with a building that needed a home.

Then, as a new club, it served as recreation for army personnel and some non-military members, later survived a disastrous fire and endured a perilous transition to civilian control that left it homeless for a while. But it always preserved its reputation as the friendliest curling club in town.

It's the Garrison Curling Club, now a solid fixture in southwest Calgary thanks to all the volunteers and paid staff who never lost their focus while steering their organization through good times and bad, through unity and occasional disharmony.

Club manager Wayne McAdam, who joined as a junior curler in 1968, said, "It's the social aspect that's always brought people here. That hasn't changed. People like to have a drink after they've played, and in some of the leagues the winners buy for the losers. That's gone away in most of the bigger curling clubs in Calgary."

Numerous old-timers at the Garrison concurred with that sentiment during research for this story, and plenty of sharp memories contributed to the story. Written records helped as well. However, the club's earliest years are a bit murky.

QUONSET HUT



The story begins, naturally, with the military. International tensions during the Cold War led to construction, starting in 1952, of a Royal Canadian Air Force base at Cold Lake in northern Alberta as the country's main air weapons training centre. By 1954, personnel had settled in. But by the end of the

decade, at least one building was considered surplus. It was a Quonset hut, one of the famous American-made, lightweight, galvanized-steel structures of semi-cylindrical design that were so portable and expedient, they sprang up all over North America, Europe and the Pacific during the Second World War.

The story goes that the Quonset was moved from Cold Lake to Currie Barracks in Calgary for use as a curling club for army personnel and their families.

But another version puts the building's origins in Beaverlodge, Alberta. Or it could be that one place supplied the building and another one the rink's first ice plant. More certain is the recollection that donated rocks came from Beaverlodge.

In any case, a rink, which soon became known as the Garrison Club, was set up around 1960 at Currie Barracks with the tacit blessing of the base commander. (A note on the name: In the early 1950s, when the base expanded rapidly because of the Korean War, it was also sometimes referred to as the Calgary Garrison because various army units were just temporarily passing through – “garrisoned” – not stationed there to live semi-permanently in barracks.)

Volunteers pitched in and adapted the relocated building using borrowed money from the Department of National Defence that was later repaid.

“After the army moved the Quonset to Calgary, we opened the club in the fall of 1961, without a lounge,” said Homer Touchette, a former soldier who joined the club that year. Located at 2300 Flanders Ave.S.W. on the base, it had four sheets of ice and an ATCO trailer for a changing room.

“We put in windows and other improvements,” said Touchette. Volunteer labour did most of the work, a club tradition that continues to this day. The Garrison opened its first lounge in 1962, with the liquor licence issued to National Defence Calgary. A two-storey wooden clubhouse followed in time for the 1963-64 season, presenting an opportunity for some playful antics.

“We used to throw beer cans at the curlers from the open windows if we didn't like their shot,” Touchette said with a laugh.

CIVILIANS WELCOMED

Initially a military-only facility, the club began accepting civilian members in 1963 along with rental leagues. Another change came in 1968 with the launch of a junior curlers' program, organized by Emily McAdam, Wayne's mother. “All these leagues turned it into a great little curling club,” Touchette said.

Irene Allan, who began curling in 1967 in the mixed and ladies leagues, agreed.

“It was like belonging to a family,” she said. “There were sometimes fights and disagreements – that's part of being a family – but when I lost my first husband, people rallied round and helped me. They were wonderful.”

Around 1968, it acquired an official name: CFB Calgary Curling Club, in line with the controversial “unification” program by Defence Minister Paul Hellyer that brought the proud army, navy and air force

divisions under one generic Canadian Forces umbrella. (However, many old-timers never stopped calling it the Garrison Club.)

That multifaceted military merger made formal recognition of the club inevitable because the army branch, like the navy and air force, had to log all of its assets for the new central command. Touchette said local army personnel who had pushed to create the club had until then been carefully navigating under the radar of an exacting federal bureaucracy. “It was built without permission from Ottawa,” he said, “but we got away with it. We had the club for about seven years before the army even had it on audit. Before then, it was, ‘What curling rink?’”

By then the club had embraced its civilian membership, but it was still fundamentally an army operation.

Keith Puttick, a navy veteran, said, “You had your structured social activities with the officers and enlisted men and others, such as anybody who was affiliated with military – civilians who worked on the base, RCMP, various dependents. It wasn’t completely military.”

His wife Shirley was, in army terms, a dependent. “I tagged along for the ride,” she said. “My kids grew up in the curling club because once we became involved, within a couple of years, Keith was vice-president, then president a couple of years later. From then on, we’ve been pretty much involved.”

Besides broadening the cultural experience, civilians brought something else to the club – stability.

“The trouble with military curlers, you really didn’t want them on your teams because one day they were here, and the next day they were in Wainwright or someplace else,” Touchette said. “So it was hard to keep a team together with army members.”

DEMOCRACY PREVAILS

But those soldiers had a strong commitment to the club, in part because of its neutral approach to rank. “One of the things that you found with the military was, because of the ranks, the officers, the NCOs [non-commissioned officers], and the junior ranks were not allowed into each other’s messes,” said McAdam, referring to the strictly segregated mess halls where the various army hierarchies ate and socialized.

“The curling rink was a place where they could all go and not worry about their rank, where they could be friends.”

“When it came to curling, rank didn’t matter,” concurred Joe Ganter. “I curled with colonels and I curled with privates and there was no difference. Once you were on the ice, you were Joe and Bob and Pete or whatever your name was. That’s just how it was.”

Keith Puttick said the rank-free zone benefited newcomers, too. “It was very much an informal club. There was no difference whether you had been here 20 years or two years. People knew who you were, but your length of time in the club just didn’t enter into anything. When you came into the club, everybody was pretty much welcomed by everybody else.”

The relentless volunteerism was also an equalizer. Whatever the task at hand, club members rolled up their sleeves and got it done. Irene Allan recalled that Wayne McAdam's parents, Mac and Emily, set up the snack bar.

"Emily brought everything from her kitchen to get it going," Allan said. "Everybody worked hard. I don't want to just name one family, but Mac and Emily worked especially hard for this club."

"This place was run basically by volunteers," said Puttick. "There were only three people I can recollect who were paid employees in the early years and that was the manager, the head ice-maker and the cleaner.

"Everybody else – all the committees, all the people who were running the leagues – they were all volunteers. Anybody who worked a snack bar was a volunteer. We had people helping with the ice. Eventually the bartenders became paid employees but there were still times when people would volunteer behind the bar if they got busy."

(Records show that staff members, including club managers, were paid from sales revenue. National Defence controlled the finances of the non-profit club.)

Recalling those days, Ganter joked about the way members easily slid into unpaid roles.

"I got involved in 1973 when I first started curling here. And then I got roped into taking over the men's league around 1985, and I've been on the board ever since. It seems like once you get in, you can't get out!"

GROWTH AND DISASTER



The 1970s saw continuous growth. On Dec. 5, 1977 a new addition was officially opened. The cinder block construction was added onto east end of the club. Downstairs it included a conference room on one side of the hallway and locker/washrooms on the other side. Upstairs, it provided a dance floor and an office for the manager.

A yellowed newspaper clipping shows a smiling Brigadier-General Patrick Mitchell, scissors in hand, slicing through the ribbon that separated the old from the new. Also in the picture are club president Jerry O'Hagan, vice president Ron Poole, secretary Randy Bethune, bar manager Jack Watson and committee heads Mac McAdam, Arlene Shadbolt, Bill Rayfield, George Leikeim, Hatch Rawnsley, Wilf Johnson and Edith Tillsley. The caption concludes with: "Missing from the photo is Calgary's greatest ice maker, Ken Crozier."

From there, life went on fairly uneventfully at the CFB Calgary Curling Club. That is, until June 1987, when a fire broke out and destroyed the clubhouse and lounge. It was a devastating blow.



According to the Calgary Herald's Murray Rauw in a story published 18 months later, "The cause of the fire was never determined, although construction to remove asbestos insulation was underway at the time. The steel structure [the original Quonset hut] covering the ice surface remained intact, but the lounge, viewing and locker areas of the four-sheet club were lost." Most of the trophies, many framed pictures "and all of the atmosphere went up in smoke," Rauw wrote.

Wayne McAdam recalled passing the early-evening fire as smoke wafted skyward and people stood watching the whole thing. "You could hear the booze exploding," he said.

The fire's destruction left 290 curlers either looking for new ice or contemplating a year or more off.

Some never came back, but when the club reopened in October 1988, membership stood at about 200, according to the Herald.

HOME AGAIN



The facilities they returned to represented the biggest single expense in the club's history up to that time, although exact numbers are hard to come by. The best estimate of the total reconstruction cost was \$730,300, financed in part by an interest-free loan of \$115,000 from the Canadian Forces Central Fund, which was paid off in 1997 out of self-generated fees and lounge profits. A few lower figures exist for the post-fire reconstruction but perhaps some of the military's costs weren't always factored in. Certainly, volunteer labour wasn't. CFB Calgary's 1990 statement of official replacement cost calculated it would require \$1,282,581 to rebuild again, if all workers were to be paid.

Anyway, the new building was worth the wait, with its abundant fluorescent lighting, carpeting, enlarged locker space and many new items including kitchen equipment, sound system, photocopier, vending machine, security screens and an overhauled ice plant. "We even have washrooms upstairs now," Jack Watson, by then the club's manager, told Rauw. "With so many people back, we must have been doing something right."

Even before all costs were in, J.A.G. Haman of National Defence in Ottawa, who was the director of non-public funds services, wrote in a letter to the base commander: "CFB Calgary now enjoys a greatly enhanced facility." Members and the club executive could be forgiven if they thought this was now their permanent home. Looking to the future, they made sure it was designed and built for easy expansion to six sheets when required, and walls contained "knock-out" sections to allow additional viewing windows if needed.

Improvements were always made when possible. In early 1990, the club borrowed \$20,000 from CFB Calgary for landscaping and to solve a drainage problem affecting the ice area. That loan was also retired in 1997, by which time there was a healthy \$60,000-plus in the bank account. Much of the financial success was credited to the fundraising efforts, primarily the building fund, supported by members.

Between 1988 and 1997, the club was self-sufficient. The only costs to the Crown were garbage and snow removal, grounds maintenance and "grants in lieu of taxes" (money paid by Ottawa to local governments to make up for property-tax exemptions on federal land).

Over the years, the CFB Calgary Curling Club had become a vital part of the community and the western Canadian curling culture. It played host to some of the sport's top names, such as Paul Gowse, Ron Northcott, George Fink, Frank Morissette and Wayne Sokolsky, as well as top-ranked clubs in bonspiels.

One famous curler joined the club in 1997 and is now an honorary member – Fred Britton, who started curling in Manitoba in 1945 at age 13.

Here's part of his record:

- 1964 Brier Canadian Men's Champ, 1964 World Men's Champ
- 1977 Inducted into the B.C. Sports Hall of Fame
- 2000 Inducted into the Canadian Curling Hall of Fame
- 2010 Honorary Member Garrison Curling Club
- 2010 SACA Award of Recognition (Volunteer)
- 2013 Honoured at the Ford World Men's Championship Opening Ceremonies.

"I just retired from the board last year so they could get some younger blood," Britton said in early 2013. Not long afterward, he volunteered yet again and now holds the fundraiser board position, showing this curler is still young at heart.

By the 1990s, the club had become a training centre for youth curlers, including program participants at five Calgary schools, and also a facility for non-curling community events. It was home to rental leagues such as the Bow Valley Singles, Glendale Ladies, Bayview/Palliser communities, Club 24 and the Royal Alberta United Services Institute, as well as its own seniors' and regular men's, women's and mixed

leagues, according to a four-page club history summary dated January 1999, whose author was not recorded.

The document was prepared as part of the club's response to an announcement that would throw its very existence into doubt, and which nobody saw coming: CFB Calgary was going to be permanently closed as part of a consolidation of army units.

FIGHTING FOR ITS LIFE

The 1996 federal budget revealed the move. The government cited cost-cutting needs but some observers suspected Calgary's failure to elect a single Liberal member of Parliament since 1968 also played a role, at least in the decision to move the operation to Edmonton, a more Liberal-friendly city. Regardless, the club now had a momentous battle on its hands – against powerful forces fuelled by big money and backed by formidable politicians as the contenders eyed this sudden availability of some of Calgary's most valuable inner-city real estate.

With the name CFB Calgary doomed, the recently renamed Garrison Curling Club became incorporated as a non-profit recreational society in January 1997. Membership totalled about 800, 60 per cent of whom were active or retired military. Base closure was set for 1998, with a federal agency called the Canada Lands Company assigned to handle the real estate deals.

The Garrison Club, lacking a long-term lease, was operating under an "interim agreement" with Canada Lands with the hope a permanent arrangement might be negotiated so the club would stay put. But club president Con McGinnis was soon complaining of getting "the cold shoulder" from Canada Lands.

"We have concerns, there is no question about it. They don't want us here," McGinnis told the Herald's Bob Bergen in a story published Feb. 20, 1998.

The club sat on a three-hectare site that was wanted by others, including the Calgary Regional Health Authority. It had deeper pockets than the club, whose vice-president Walt Nychka said his organization's offer of \$350,000 was turned down by Canada Lands. Calgary Currie's member of the Legislative Assembly, Jocelyn Burgener, told the Herald for a March 21, 1998 story that she was sad a deal couldn't be struck to keep the curling club where it was, but she wasn't surprised.

"They (club officials) spent 18 months working on a development strategy that Canada Lands had no interest in recognizing," Burgener said. "I'm really disappointed that Canada Lands hadn't been more forthcoming right from the word 'go' so they could have pursued a more productive future for themselves."

It was soon official: the Garrison Curling Club's building was facing the wrecker's ball. But not without resistance.

"There were guys who were going to chain themselves to the doors so that they could never come and bulldoze down the building," said Wayne McAdam.

"There was a lot of anxiety," Ganter said. "They were just going to shut us down."

On July 28, 2000 the old club, built around that resettled Quonset hut, was officially vacated. It was demolished within four weeks, proving that government really can move fast when it wants to.

Eventually, the club would be sold land east of the Centennial Arenas for the reasonable price of \$1. (Yet in an odd move that some considered spiteful, the federal government carted off all the curling rocks, for no apparent purpose. A legend persists there's a warehouse in Edmonton housing rocks seized from Calgary and other locations, virtually forgotten and gathering dust.)

The immense tangle of trading and selling land at the former Currie Barracks was "a brutal process," Shirley Puttick recalled.

"It took us from 2000, when I came back on the board of directors, until 2003 before all the land swapping was accomplished.

"There were four pieces of land involved in the whole deal. There was Canada Lands and the South West Arena Society (SWAS). The City wanted to build low-cost housing at the corner of Glenmore Trail and Crowchild Trail on the northwest corner there. And there was a right-of-way at 47th Avenue near Crowchild that got amalgamated, and various land swaps.

"After a year, we asked, 'What's happening with our file?' and they'd find it in the bottom of someone's in-basket because it wasn't a high priority for anybody except us. They assumed that eventually we would just go away, give up."

A bright spot emerged when the recently defunct Westwinds Curling Club, which was winding down its finances, was confident enough in the Garrison Club to give it \$47,500 on the condition construction would start within 14 months. Non-Garrison curlers were eager to give the sport all the help they could muster. Between 1982, when the Family Leisure Centre opened, and 2000, the city lost 50 sheets of curling ice, because of such closures as the Big Four rink and the Westwinds, and the Calgary Winter Club's shrinkage to 10 sheets, from 12.

After all the delays, Calgary Alderman Barry Erskine took up the Garrison's fight and pressured the decision makers to, well, make a decision. Finally, Canada Lands released that piece of real estate on the former base, not far from the club's original site, opening the way for a new building after a successful fundraising drive. Donations included money from the Provincial Community Facility Enhancement Program, the Community Lottery Board and the Calgary Flames organization. Individual members were also generous.

HOME AT LAST



A Jan. 24, 2004 story in the Herald summed it up: “After nearly four years in the wilderness, the Garrison Curling Club has a home of its own. The new \$3-million, six-sheet facility officially opened its doors Friday, and the members who called the old four-sheet club home couldn’t be happier.” Their shiny new building (address: 2288 47th Ave. S.W.) had been designed by the architectural firm of Graham Edmunds, with XPS, a division of Permasteel, doing the construction.

The Herald’s reporter, Allen Cameron, quoted club manager Shirley Puttick: “Our people are walking in the door and they’re saying, ‘My God, we’re home.’”

Calgary now had 76 sheets of curling ice – down from 136 spread over 10 clubs in the mid-1980s, according to the Herald – so the Garrison’s re-opening was definitely a welcome comeback in the eyes of Calgary curlers, whose numbers had grown over the years while sheet total shrank. Newspaper coverage included a photo of club member Norene Gray, rock in hand, testing the new ice.

As always, unpaid labour had a great deal to do with the rebuilding. Professional trades took care of the fire system, plumbing, electrical and basic carpentry but club members did much of the finishing. When it was all unveiled, they had a right to beam with pride.

Mind you, feelings were still raw. Puttick told the Herald the old building’s destruction “was just devastating for all of our members. People felt like a piece of their hearts had been torn out.” But, she said, even though the upstairs lounge hadn’t been completed and the main-floor cafeteria still needed work, “everybody is thrilled to be back.” The timing meant there’d only be half a season this time around.

Interviewed for this story, Puttick recalled, “On that first Friday night – the mixed league – people were ecstatic. We didn’t actually get the final go-ahead from the building inspector until about 4 o’clock in the afternoon when he said, ‘Okay. You’re good to go.’

“Well, we had the booze ordered in, we had the cash registers set up, and at 7 o’clock, the first draws hit the ice.”

They were the leading edge of a big wave of returning curlers. When they finished their season’s commitments to other clubs, Garrison members ensured the men’s and mixed leagues were jammed, and soon there were limited openings in the women’s leagues. As well, the Calgary Youth Curling Association planned to make the Garrison Club their home, the Herald’s Cameron wrote.

During the closure, the club had found ice elsewhere for many of the members, and some never returned. For others, however, the temporary exile was a reminder of how much they loved the Garrison.

“Every club we curled in while we were shut down, they treated us very well – don’t get me wrong – but it wasn’t our club. You know what I mean? It wasn’t home,” said Keith Puttick.

Joe Ganter remembered his experience at the Calgary Curling Club when the Garrison was closed after the fire. It was hard to get to know those members, he said, who pretty much stuck to their own groups.

“I curled there for a whole year and when I left there at the end of the year, I didn’t know any more people than when I went in at the beginning of the year. You’d show up, you’d all curl, and then they’d just disappear. The Garrison Club is a great experience. It’s a social club as much as a curling club.”

So it would seem the story should end with a “happily ever after.” Well, not quite. There was one more issue to be dealt with in the new millennium, one that would evoke powerful emotions in people who had calmly, stoically overcome the aftermath of a fire and a government-demolished clubhouse. It was to do with ashtrays.

NO SMOKING

The 2004 annual general meeting, the first in the new building, had a significant item on the agenda regarding a proposed policy change. For the first time in its history, there would be no smoking allowed in the Garrison Curling Club, not even on the ice, not even in a specially designated area. A new building was going to mean a clean slate in air quality, especially with the junior curlers coming in en masse.

“Oh my Lord, we didn’t think we’d get through that,” said Irene Allen, who was on the board of directors when the debate raged. “The old curling club had been so thick with smoke you had to cut the air to get upstairs. And then we wanted to say, you can’t do that in the new building.”

“We actually had people walk out of the meeting over that. There were other curling clubs where smoking was allowed but the city was bringing in a bylaw. The writing was on the wall – soon there’d be no smoking anywhere, so we might as well start right now.”

“It wasn’t a popular decision for some, and we lost a few people over it,” said Keith Puttick. “They moved to clubs that still allowed smoking.”

With the new Garrison Club open, members and managers had to equip it, and money was in short supply. As of 2013, there were still plenty of hand-me-down furniture and fixtures in the club, not all of them matching.

“A lot of stuff has been donated by members,” said Wayne McAdam, “so we have a mishmash of light fixtures, chairs and other things. Not everything came as a set. Other clubs, including the Calgary Curling Club, were nice to us.” As of this writing, the homey aura persisted in the upper lounge (opened in 2006), which was named the Westwinds Lounge in recognition of the closed club’s generous donation.

“That first summer we opened up, when it came time to pay the wages we didn’t have the cash,” said Joe Ganter. Member loans covered the deficiency.

THE FUTURE

The Garrison now has 1,000 members and hosts 10 rental leagues. The club continues to hold its traditional social events: Grey Cup party, golf tournaments, spiels, Ron and Karen Parry Memorial Family Funspiel Dec. 26, Ray Tull Memorial Over 60s Spiel Dec. 27-30, RAUSI vs Club and the Mini Brier, and the Putt and Sweep, all of them a part of the club’s long, rich history. A key ingredient is still its enthusiastic volunteer base as efforts continue to pay down the mortgage (it’s hoped by 2020) and to maintain the facility to the best standard possible.

The future looks good for the Garrison Curling Club. The influx of youthful curlers bodes well for the club and the sport in general as they, too, enjoy the relaxed atmosphere and the camaraderie.

New members are bringing new events, spiels and leagues. Fresh programs include Learn To Curl and Greenhorn leagues, as well as the junior recreational and competitive program. The Club encourages corporate events and hosts school bookings to remain community-minded and introduce new curlers to the sport.

The Garrison salutes those who have made exemplary contributions to the club by awarding an honorary membership. Their pictures and those of past presidents are hung with pride in the entranceway.

Our history has shown that our organization has great heart and spirit and it continues to be the friendliest curling club in town.

Written by Bob Blakey

Bob Blakey is an award-winning freelance journalist based in Calgary.