

# Peekskill's 'blue-collar' yacht club turns 100

*Brian J. Howard  
The Journal News*

The day the Peekskill Yacht Club sank, it was all hands on deck, as usual. The call came on a cold, January morning in 1996: The barge that supported the clubhouse off Travis Point had taken on water. The pumps keeping it afloat had stopped working and it sank 6 feet to the river floor.

"We were here for over 24 hours and there were, like, 60 or 70 of us all night long, all day long, trying to save what we had," recalls club Commodore Steve Mikulak, a third-generation member.

"To me, that's really what the place is about," Mikulak said. "I was 18 at the time, and it didn't matter. That was the place I grew up in. I'll be here all night if I have to."

The event was a signature moment for the Peekskill Yacht Club, which turns 100 this year. Members began celebrating that centennial with a dinner earlier this month in the clubhouse that was built on dry land to replace the one lost to the river 12 years ago. An April gala is planned and a June Commissioning Day event culminates the milestone celebration.

The old clubhouse, cheaper to replace than repair, was sold to a marina in Verplanck. Twenty-year member Tony Masi said selling it was a tougher decision than raising it from the river floor.

"Every time I take my own boat down the river (and see it), I kind of have a moment of silence," Masi said.

The new clubhouse is the product of mostly in-house labor, a team effort that is the club's trademark. Aside from a 40-hour-a-year work requirement instituted in the 1970s to keep up club facilities, members maintain city moorings and ramps at Riverfront Green Park, volunteer at the annual Peekskill Celebration and stand ready to assist with emergencies on the river.

"Yacht club" might conjure images of a stodgy millionaires' club where the upper crust keep their luxury liners between weekend jaunts. The name is misleading, though.

Mikulak calls it a blue-collar club. Members are carpenters and electricians, shop owners and police officers. They chip in according to their expertise.

"It says yacht club, but it's really just a boat club," said Mikulak, who works for Reader's Digest in Pleasantville and owns a 33-foot Sea Ray. "Everyone down here is just a working guy."

"Once in a while you get a lawyer or something like that," adds Bob Lewis of Montrose, who started the work policy when he was commodore. "But you get a lot of tradesmen and everybody puts their hours in."

Predating the 1908 meeting when minutes were first kept, the former Peekskill Motor Boat Club first took up residence at the mouth of Annsville Creek.

Soon evicted because they didn't own the land, members towed their clubhouse out past the old railroad bridge and anchored it off Riverfront Green. In 1915, they moved downstream to Travis Point.

The city bought the five-acre site from the New York Central Railroad in 1966 and began leasing it to the club. A 25-year lease agreement was reached in 2007.

"As time went on, they added a meeting room," said former club historian Al Collins, the most senior member. "In fact, in the minutes it was noted that somebody donated the first roll of toilet paper."

The move to Travis Point cost the club many members who didn't want to go "down there in the woods. That's what they said," said Collins, but membership eventually rebounded.

At 29, Mikulak hardly cuts the image of a grizzled seafarer that his title suggests. But he represents a youth movement that has seen 30 new members - more than a quarter of the club's 110 total - in the last four years. All but one of the members are men, though women are equally welcome to join. A woman's auxiliary was active for 60 years until the 1990s.

John Vargo, publisher of the widely read "Boating on the Hudson and Beyond" magazine, said yacht clubs make boating more affordable than the marinas that are replacing them.

Cheap riverfront land, particularly during the post-World War II economic boom, gave rise to many clubs, Vargo said. Today they face rising costs and property taxes, and fewer young people are joining their parents' clubs.

Mikulak did just that, though. He said he wants to pay back all those who came before and made the boating life possible for him.

"My goal is to continue to help get it to the next 100 years. That's the way I look at it," he said. "To then have my son join, to be a fourth-generation member, that's what you look for."