

## **QPTC THROUGH THE EYES OF BARB PRITCHARD**

One of the first things my husband, Jim, and I did upon our arrival in Peterborough in April, 1958, was to look for a tennis club. We discovered we had a choice between two places. A single public court was located on the hospital grounds. It had a cement surface and a heavy wire net. Everyone, presumably including the hospital patients, knew when you had failed to get the ball over the net because of the loud twang of the ball hitting the metal. And if you hit the ball hard enough, the ball would spring back and hit you in the face, at which point you were glad you were only a few paces from the Emergency Department. If this wasn't your style, there was the Quaker Club.

The Quaker Tennis Club was situated in a beautiful location on the east bank of the Otonabee River just north of the Hunter Street Bridge on property owned by the Quaker Oats Company. The club paid \$1.00 per year in rent. The annual membership fees when Jim and I joined in 1958 were \$10.00 for men and \$7.50 for women. This discriminatory system was in effect for many years and was changed only after a great deal of furious argument.

Alongside a large, park-like, grassy area were two clay courts. The lighting system consisted of large bulbs hanging from a wire strung lengthwise across the middle of the courts. Everything swayed ominously whenever the wind blew. Sometimes a light bulb would explode, sending glass fragments all over the court and occasionally all over the players.

The only access to the courts was by a long, steep, wooden staircase which ran down a high bank from the parking lot on Driscoll Terrace to the courts below. Even if it meant near collapse, no self-respecting tennis player would think of pausing on the climb back up until well out of sight of the clubhouse. Eventually we were able to save our pride, not to mention our breath, when Quaker Oats built a parking lot at court level and the infamous staircase was removed. Incidentally, the debris from a two-day fire which destroyed the Quaker mill on the west side of the river in 1916 is buried under this parking lot.

Our children, Bob and Sue, were introduced to the tennis environment at an early age. In the late 1950s and the 1960s, many members were the parents of babies and small children, so we all brought our young offspring to the club with us. We would alternate between playing tennis and looking after all the kids, taking it in turns to sit out a set. The large area of grass was ideal for children to play on, and also for baby carriages, strollers, playpens (wooden), spread-out blankets, and other assorted necessities. You can imagine the fun we had getting some of these items down and, worse, up the big staircase.

For decades, the tennis season started very late because the high water table often kept the courts soaking wet until June. Every so often the river would flood, resulting in water up to the clubhouse steps. One particularly watery year, flood levels set a new record, so Jim and I went canoeing on the courts. To mark the occasion, we made a notch on the net post on Court One—not the easiest task when you are in a canoe—to indicate the high-water mark. This historic indicator remained for years until a small property committee decided we needed new net posts. They went ahead with the plan before the season started, disposing of the old posts in the process. The high-water mark, which could

easily have been noted on the new post by someone standing on solid ground, went to the scrap heap and a piece of history was lost for ever.

The Pritchard canoe stayed at home when high water hit the club during the Great Flood of 2004, which was caused, not by river water, but by continuous torrential rain totalling nearly 250 millimetres, over 190 millimetres of which fell in three hours. The clubhouse escaped damage on that occasion when the water stopped just short of the top step onto the veranda.

In 1985, when the club boasted five Har-Tru courts and modern lighting, I did a lot of research into the history of the club, which I incorporated into the club newsletters I wrote. I discovered that the reason for the floods in the early years was that the club was built around the Wand Planing Mill, and the sluiceway for floating logs to the mill was in the valley where the courts were situated. In the early 1970s, Jim and some other engineers in the club decided that the floods could be stopped by damming the area at the north end of the club property. A big work party set to work—and lo and behold, no more floods! Except, that is, for the occasion when a malfunction in the automatic sprinklers caused them to turn on while the courts were occupied by the Tuesday Afternoon Ladies Club, which disbanded shortly after this near drowning. The sprinkler system didn't last much longer either.

Among the other historical nuggets I managed to dig up was the purpose of several small gates at the top of the original fencing around Court One. In the early days, these gates were used for throwing snow through because each winter Court One became an ice rink, complete with music and coloured lights. (Peterborough's Bob Gainey, the famous National Hockey League player and coach, skated there as a boy.) Hot chocolate was available for 5¢, but you had to bring your own cup. Rink maintenance equipment was kept at the foot of the bank in a little shed which, until it became unsafe in its old age and had to be torn down, was later used for storing tennis-court supplies and as a convenient seat (on its roof) for tournament spectators.

I also discovered that the club had been formed in 1922 by a group of Quaker Oats employees. They themselves constructed two courts with a surface of cinders. About two years later, the surface was changed to local white clay. Around 1935, the tennis players accepted an invitation to join the newly-formed Quaker Fellowship Association, which had taken over all sporting activities of the company. The Fellowship Association built the picturesque clubhouse which is still going strong today—although it now has a few modernizations. The clubhouse is built of logs, with a veranda along the front. Inside is a magnificent fireplace, a small kitchen and two washrooms. Until we did a bit of interior renovation, we had to start off each season by spending several days spring cleaning the clubhouse which was always infested with hundreds of gigantic ants and several families of mice. The resident groundhog, which lived underneath the clubhouse, was left undisturbed however.

Among the eye-catching furnishings (some fold-up wooden chairs and a table) which graced the clubhouse for many years was an ancient piano. It had several missing keys and, as far as anyone knew, had never been tuned. Only one member was able to produce reasonable-sounding music from it. When the day came that the disreputable instrument had to go, no-one would take it, let alone buy it, although a piano tuner did offer \$5 provided the club paid the moving costs. A club member volunteered to take it to the

dump, but it was too big to fit into his truck. This problem was solved when, with a crowd of club members cheering him on, our resident pianist chopped the piano to bits with an axe.

The piano, which sat diagonally across one corner of the clubhouse, was also the source of one of the numerous scandals which hit the club over the years. A horrified member discovered a bed, consisting of sleeping bags and pillows, behind the piano!

Not long after that, a useful item was added to club equipment—half a nylon stocking on a long pole for retrieving balls from the river. It was invented and constructed by Bob and it hung along the veranda ceiling. One memorable day, a shocked member reached up to get the net and discovered a Playboy centrefold pasted to the ceiling.

Bob contributed more than the ball retriever to the club. He looked after the courts for several years. When we first became members, the long-time groundsman was a Quaker Oats employee, Ernie Wilkinson, who lived at the top of the hill in a house on the southeast corner of Driscoll Terrace and Cricket Place. He looked after the courts and the entire park. When he was about seventy, it was decided that he was too old to do all that, so Quaker Oats hired someone else to look after the park! Ernie was still pulling a heavy roller over the courts in his late eighties, shortly before his death. A couple of years later, Bob became the groundsman. He was also employed by the company that built a third court in 1973 and two more courts in 1977.

When Jim and I joined the club in 1958, the surface of the two courts was white clay; this was replaced in the mid-sixties by red clay (*en-tous-cas*). About twenty years later, the red clay was changed to Har-Tru to match the other three courts. In the early days, players were expected to drag the court and sweep the lines when they had finished playing. Your name was mud (or clay) if you didn't do so. In fact I think you could be drummed out of the club if you failed to observe this courtesy.

Misbehaviour such as that would certainly have caught the sharp eye of Walker Jones, the Quaker employee who was the club administrator at the time. He was appointed by the Quaker Company and he ran the club for years. Although small committees assisted him with such events as socials, leagues and tournaments, his word was law. It took a long time to convince him to approve a change in the club's tournament setup for example. In the old days, players didn't choose their own partners. The small tournament committee arranged all the teams so that the best player was the partner of the weakest, the second best played with the next to weakest, and so on. To ensure that nobody had more than one match per day, each tournament was spread over at least a week.

In 1970, the Quaker Company was persuaded to let the members elect an executive to run the club. Much to everyone's embarrassment, only three people agreed to stand for election and no executive could be formed. So Walker had to come back for one more year.

Shortly after that, in the 1970s, the club's name was changed to Quaker Park Tennis Club because some members were afraid that the original name gave the impression that membership was limited to Quaker employees, while others, believe it or not, felt that the original name had too much of a religious connotation. Future generations may wonder about the word "Quaker" because, after a couple of name changes of its own, the Quaker Oats Company became Pepsi-QTG. (QTG stands for Quaker Tropicana Gatorade.)

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Before the club brought in a court-booking system, ideas for court-allocation schemes were met with varying degrees of enthusiasm. For example, in an attempt to make sure everyone had a fair share of court time, a board with name tags on it was introduced. Some players disliked this system so much that the board kept disappearing. Every day there was a game of Hunt the Board. On one occasion it had to be fished out of the river. Eventually it seemed to have gone for good, but after many weeks it was discovered by accident behind a trapdoor in the kitchen ceiling when someone climbed up there to investigate a smelly heater wire.

For many years, the club played in a district league comprising seven clubs. In 1977, as the Quaker Club membership grew, it was decided that the club should enter three teams instead of one. All three teams needed a distinguishing name. One team consisted entirely of student members (including Bob and Sue), who in short order cleverly named themselves The Quaker Muff-its (after the breakfast cereal, Quaker Muffets), and for which Bob designed and silk-screened a hilarious logo for their T-shirts.

In the meantime, a general meeting was the scene of a raging one-hour debate over what to call the two teams made up entirely of adults. After the stormy session had reached the stage of deciding to use the imaginative theme of colours, the fur really flew. Black and Blue were out (too violent); Blue and Grey were out (the American Civil War); Orange and Black were out (Halloween); Black and White were out (racist); Red and Orange were out (they clashed). Yellow (too cowardly), Red (too hot), Pink (too feminine), and Purple (too old) were out with anything at all. And so it went. In the end it was decided to use the ingenious names of the Quaker Greens and the Quaker Blues—though “Blues” barely made it (too melancholy).

That year, with the number of teams in the league now totalling ten, the Muff-its won the trophy. Burger King was having an advertising promotion involving magnificent cardboard gold crowns at the time, so the team’s “Two Pauls” (Chow and Guinand) went to the local outlet and emerged with a huge stack of them for the victorious team members. I made each of the players a card sporting a gold ribbon, all the team members’ names, a *Numero Uno* cartoon figure, and a photo I had taken of the team wearing their golden headgear.

Long after the Muff-its had left Peterborough for budding careers and the raising of families of their own, Quaker cereal was again used for team names, this time in a house league set up, sadly, in memory of Kay and Peggy Edwards, two club members who died in a car crash. I and two other members were appointed to devise and set up a system. We decided to have four teams, each named after a Quaker cereal. The trouble was that none of us could think of suitable cereals. Puffed Wheat didn’t quite cut it. So I went to the supermarket and looked over the shelves and shelves of Quaker breakfast products. I found four one-syllable cereals, only one of which (Quaker Oh’s) I had ever heard of. Nobody else had heard of any of them either, so the following year we changed the team names to the Serves, the Smashes, the Lobs and the Volleys.

Returning to the subject of Puffed Wheat for a moment, the cereal’s package was emblazoned with the words, “Shot from Guns.” This was no idle statement. Twice a day, an enormous boom reverberated over a substantial area around the Quaker plant. This was

inclined to make pedestrians on the Hunter Street Bridge jump out of their skins. At the tennis club, it certainly made your own perfect “shot” go awry. The gunshot, though, was part of Peterborough’s culture and was a source of great interest to tourists. So when some residents of a nearby brand-new apartment block complained about the noise, people were not amused. After all, who was there first? Unfortunately, the squeaky wheel gets the oil so Quaker Oats spent a fortune soundproofing the “Gun Room”. We all missed the boom.

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Any type of change at the club usually resulted in bitter, prolonged debates. The introduction of the tie-breaker system (the nine-point, replaced a few years later by the twelve-point) was an example. Even more heated and prolonged was the argument about the change from white to yellow tennis balls. Not much noise was heard, however, when a few players showed up with cans of pink, or green, or pink-and-green-striped balls. This novelty soon wore off because nobody had the super-human eyesight necessary to counter the poor visibility of pink or green on our green courts. The striped balls had the added shortcoming of turning grey as they rotated through the air.

Another bone of contention was the arrival of metal racquets. Prior to this, everyone had wooden ones. The only time most of us bought new racquets was when our old ones had warped because we hadn’t taken enough care about the way we put them in their wooden presses. Our new racquets would invariably be the same make and model as our old ones because new varieties were seldom introduced. The most popular wooden racquet, by far, was the Dunlop Maxply. The only time I deviated from a Maxply was when we were living in Montreal and I bought a racquet—a Slazenger Challenge—for the very sensible reason that it had a nuclear-energy-type symbol on the shaft and Jim worked in the nuclear-energy field. I still have it. It is warped beyond belief. In fact, because of its bizarre shape, I used it as a fee collector at fun tournaments. I would tuck folded pieces of paper into the strings. Players would pull a paper out and pay the amount of money written on it. Amounts started at 1¢ and rose in increments of 1¢ to a total of the number of players in the event.

When oversize racquets were introduced, another really big uproar flared up at the club. Players setting foot on the courts brandishing these monsters were treated with utter disdain, especially when they started winning tournaments by using the gigantic racquet faces as if they were brick walls. A compromise took place with the arrival of mid-size racquets.

The next argument was about synthetic stringing. Our wooden racquets were always strung with gut. Gut, in the wooden-racquet era, was fairly inexpensive because few players used anything else. The reason for this was that the only other type of string readily available was silk—which I actually had in one of my racquets when we lived in Vancouver. Because there were no stringers in Peterborough at that time, we sent our racquets to a place in Toronto by bus.

Eventually most of us had metal, mid-size racquets, strung with synthetics. By the time new racquet models featuring graphite and fiberglass appeared, players were replacing their racquets often and were having them strung at frequent intervals in Peterborough.

A really fierce clash among club members, to the point of shouting, occurred over the change from all-white to coloured clothing. Eventually, the pro-coloureds won the day, but not until a long list of items which could NOT be worn had been approved. You couldn't have a bare chest for example, nor could you wear a T-shirt with a slogan on it, or frayed shorts, or a bathing suit. I was furious about the last item because it meant that I couldn't dash around the courts in my string bikini.

Speaking of clothing, stories about mine abound. Of minor note were the occasions when I ran around the court with my skirt flying up in the wind, causing me to realize that I had forgotten to put on my tennis over-bloomers. Much more memorable was the time I was playing in an inter-club match and was serving for a crucial game. In retrospect, it appears I had failed to pull my skirt zipper right to the top. As I stretched up to hit one of my speed-of-light aces, my skirt fell to the ground. Needless to say, this was on Court One in front of the clubhouse veranda which was crowded with spectators.

I had to endure an even worse embarrassment in the pre-skirt days when we wore white shorts. I always travelled to the club wearing slacks (this was also the pre-tracksuit days) over my shorts. Upon my arrival at the club on this particular occasion, I was only too happy to accept an invitation to complete a foursome with the three men warming up on Court One. I stepped onto the court and removed my slacks. For a moment or two I wondered why it felt so drafty. You guessed it! No shorts! There I stood in my underwear in full view of the three men, plus numerous others on the veranda.

It wasn't only in public that tennis-clothes shedding caused me grief. I was alone at home on the stressful day when I couldn't get my skirt off. Something had happened to the zipper and I couldn't budge it. There was no way to get the skirt down or up, short of cutting it off. I was determined not to do that because this skirt had been worn by Canada's famous pro, Jill Hetherington, in the Federation Cup. How did I get her skirt? Well, I didn't make a special trip to the Fed Cup matches and beg for it. Jill's parents lived in Peterborough and they gave their friends any tennis stuff that Jill no longer used. Among the items I received was a pair of tennis shoes which Jill had worn while competing at the French Open. When they were given to me, they were covered in THE red clay! It has all gone now, but I have never washed the shoes, or even wiped them, on principle. As for the skirt, since I don't have it on at this moment, it is obvious that I managed to get it off in the end.

I did have one clothing claim to fame which didn't embarrass me, however. I rather liked my new white dress with a square neck and three wide rectangles at the top, each in a different shade of green. Before grand-slam tennis tournament matches were shown in full on TV, the champion was occasionally seen hoisting the trophy on high in the sports section of the TV news. Well, who should appear on such a TV spot at the end of that year's U.S. Open but Chris Evert wearing MY dress!

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While standing around on the clubhouse veranda one day in 1974, at the age of forty, I noticed that a good number of us were getting a little long in the tooth. Inspiration hit me! We should have a fun tournament for the over-forties. I visualized a one-day, all-day

event, with the players assigned different partners for each round for maximum sociability and so that nobody had to sign up with a partner. I and another forty-year-old set to work.

Political correctness was unknown then, so we named the event The Old Fogies' Tournament and decided on a nobody-ever-gets-eliminated format comprising Aged Men's Doubles, Elderly Ladies' Doubles, Decrepit Mixed Doubles and Doddering Mixed Doubles—two mixed doubles because we always had twice as many men as women, so each woman had to have two mixed partners. (One year we were one lady short and the only under-age player we could persuade to fill in was Johanna Peirson. She showed up waving a teddy bear and a pacifier and wearing a “Babe” T-shirt, a baby's bonnet and a diaper.) We decided to award nine prizes for all sorts of unannounced, amusing categories which we would present at the club dance—and I have no idea why we decided on the magic number of nine. The categories would vary each year so that players couldn't get smart and fix it. Among our ideas were the most zero-containing and most-symmetrical scores and the worst-dressed, keenest and most-absentminded players. Over the years, we made up many other humorous awards based on specific occurrences.

The response that first year was staggering. The sign-up sheet, emblazoned with an appropriate Old Fogies Emblem—a ridiculous-looking, ancient tennis player which I had found in one of my tennis books—was overflowing. The inaugural tournament, held in early September, took place in record-breaking freezing temperatures punctuated by snowstorms. Only one player, shivering in a fur-lined parka and with an open racquet cover stretched onto each knee, stayed around to cheer on the final match, which I happened to be in. In keeping with my English upbringing, I displayed my patriotism by wearing a red tracksuit, white hat and gloves, and blue skin.

Inclement weather, including rain, fog and gale-force winds, was a feature of this tournament for seven years. In 1981, however, the players had great difficulty in keeping up their usual high standard of play when they were faced with the challenge of taking to the courts in blazing sunshine. From then on, the tournament date was changed to mid-May when there would be more likelihood of frost.

Times change, of course, and players began to lead increasingly busy lives, while volunteers became hard to find. Eventually, the tournament was splendidly renamed the Over-Forty Tournament and it became a men's and ladies' singles tournament spread over the entire summer, with match dates arranged by the players; the winners received money and had their names engraved on permanent trophies.

Despite the demise of the original over-forty format, Jim felt that there was still room for a fun-type tournament, so he invented an event where players signed up in teams of five. Each team played a men's doubles, a ladies' doubles and a unisex singles against each of the other teams. Each team captain could switch his/her players around at will. At noon, play stopped temporarily while everybody went for lunch at Champs, a downtown restaurant in Charlotte Mews. This tournament was a smash hit for several years until it too bit the dust.

Another of Jim's ideas which was extremely popular, attracting members of all abilities in droves, was “Novelty Tennis Day”. This consisted of a Mini-Golf course over the entire grassy area, where players had to hit balls into, around, over, or through all sorts of obstacles and containers. On the courts, nothing was normal. Among the surprises you

encountered were such things as being tied to your partner by the ankle with a long string, or having to hit the ball in rotation with four players on each side of the net.

Jim was well known for another of his inventions, which had nothing to do with organizing fun on the courts. He developed a slight case of tennis elbow, so in true engineering fashion he constructed a contraption out of foam rubber, fabric tape and a plastic peanut-butter jar. He wore it just below the afflicted elbow and it worked like a charm.

Plenty of entertainment was provided by individual members in those days. One the most unusual events occurred when a player who was noted for his infuriating lobbing hit one of his usual sky-high shots. A dead bird dropped to the court. We named this player Al Winfield after Dave Winfield of the Toronto Blue Jays who was famous for killing a seagull with one of his throws. Then there was the player who was so anxious to retrieve his brand-new tennis ball that he fell into the river. There was also the miracle of actually finding a player's contact lens after we had all crawled gingerly around the court on our hands and knees in a seemingly impossible search. My contribution to the mirth of the time was the occasion when my racquet flew out of my hand and narrowly missed decapitating a member of the adult beginners group I was teaching. Jim one-upped me when his racquet head literally folded in two at the peak of an attempted overhead smash. The racquet hangs on our basement wall to this day.

All this seems a bit tame compared with the social activities taking place just before Jim and I joined the club in 1958. Things were really hopping in those days. Every Saturday night there had been wild parties in the clubhouse. Shortly before we arrived, these festivities were banned by Quaker Oats after a member set off a dynamite charge in the grass bank. At the same time, Quaker banned all alcoholic beverages from the premises. To the annoyance of most members, this didn't stop one member from drinking beer from a bottle (this was before cans) hidden in a brown paper bag.

For some time after these hijinks, the social calendar included opening-day and closing-day round robins which culminated in magnificent dinners and evening singsongs in the clubhouse. In between these two events, there was always a mid-summer picnic at a place on the Indian River called The Piggery, where we all changed into bathing suits in the ruins of a slaughterhouse. About twenty years later, the first of many end-of-season dinner-dances was held at the Pines Pavilion in nearby Bridgenorth. Beautifully printed signs informed patrons that several large tables had been reserved for the "Quacker Tennis Club."

After a couple of years at the Pines, the dinner-dances were moved to places like the Kawartha Golf Club, where we could have a private room. These dances were livened up by contests (such as one-liners or limerick completions) and/or skits thought up by Jim and/or me. And I was commissioned to write a couple of club songs. The first of these was a real challenge because our Scottish president insisted that it be written to the tune of *Road to the Isles*; I managed four verses and a chorus. I was given *carte blanche* for the second one, so I excelled myself by writing TWELVE verses to the tune of *When The Saints Go Marching In*. By the time we had finished singing the whole thing, we were all hoarse and I was thinking of changing my name to Anon.

Eventually, social activities at the club became limited to a couple of Saturday afternoon round robins which included the serving of hamburgers, the barbecuing of

which caused clouds of smoke to waft over the courts, thereby giving players a perfect excuse for missing the ball.

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Almost from Day One of our membership, Jim and I put in many hours of volunteer work for the club every year for forty years. We served many times on almost every position on the executive, we chaired or were members of committees, and we worked on individual projects. In addition, I taught tennis to the adult beginners and the juniors, and Jim used his jack-of-all-trades expertise on property improvement and maintenance. We enjoyed it all very much, so we were surprised and very grateful when we were made Honorary Life Members of the Club.

Barb Pritchard  
April 2011