

Whatever Happened to Shawnee Yacht Club

Early History

Shawnee Yacht Club was founded in 1941 by a group of local sailing enthusiasts with homemade boats shortly after Lake Shawnee was constructed. Those early years are well documented in an [essay by John Armstrong](#), the club's first commodore, and by [photos from the Kansas State Historical Society](#), a testament to SYC's historic relationship with Lake Shawnee and the community.



SYC Early 1940s



SYC 1960

In 1946 the club selected the current location, near 37th and West Edge, on a sheltered cove, overlooking the main body of the lake, as an ideal base for sailing. [Club members installed a boat ramp, built docks, an open-air shelter, and moored their boats in the cove.](#)

The Heydays

From the 1960s through the 1980s, during Ted Ensley's tenure as the first Superintendent of Parks and Recreation, small boat sailing flourished on Lake Shawnee. SYC members built the current clubhouse and deck, greatly expanded the dock space, paved the access road and lower parking area, installed numerous boat lifts, and constructed the current boatyard and double-wide launching ramp. Throughout those years the club consistently had over 100 member families and 100 boats. Hundreds more in the community came out to crew and participate. Club races were held twice a week and regattas were held once a month, June through August, including a big benefit regatta and auction for the Capper Foundation. The Sweet Sixteen Sailing Association repeatedly held its national championships at SYC and one year the El Toro Sailing Association held its North American Championship there.



SYC about 1982



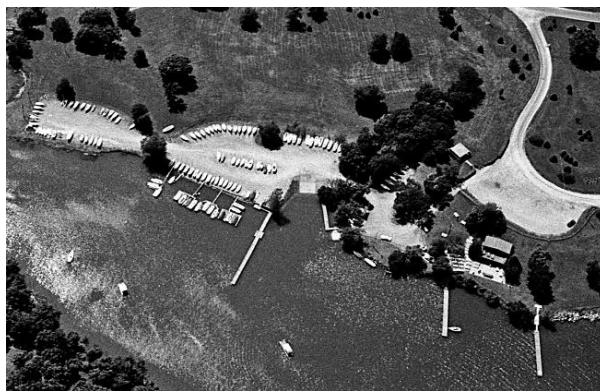
Sweet 16 Nationals at SYC

SYC was a widely recognized and respected small boat sailing venue that put Lake Shawnee on the map. The regattas drew sailors from all over the Midwest and beyond. It was a popular, safe, comfortable place for families raising their kids to be sailors. One family had five sons and all of them sailed. The father's obituary stated that he

“raised his family at Shawnee Yacht Club.” Another long-time SYC member originally moved to Topeka largely because it had an active sailing community. This era is brought back to life in an [essay by George Chaffee](#), commodore 1988, and through an extensive [photo collection by Berne Ketchum](#), veteran sailor and the chief photographer at the Topeka Capitol-Journal for many years.

The Dismantling

It was presented by the Parks & Recreation Department as an effort to help meet public demand for more rental facilities, increase the use of available facilities, and allow SYC to continue to operate the same races and functions while spending less time on maintenance. But, in reality, it largely destroyed the facilities and environment that SYC members had built and invested in for over fifty years, promoting sailing on Lake Shawnee for the community. See before and after images below (click any image for full size).



Before - Summer 1982



After - Winter 2018

In the 1990s, sailing, in general, experienced a period of decline and SYC membership followed. In 1996, with the clubhouse deck and docks needing a rebuild, P+R proposed that they take over responsibility for maintaining the clubhouse/deck and the docks and use the clubhouse as a public rental facility, with SYC allowed ten free reservations per year. Faced with pressure to carry out major maintenance the smaller club membership could not perform or fund, SYC reluctantly agreed, not foreseeing the true extent of what was to come.

As expected, P+R remodeled the clubhouse interior for general public use, rebuilt the deck, and began renting it to the public. But P+R also removed all of the many boat lifts along the shore, the custom brick fire pit/grill built by one SYC member, the swing and sandbox for the kids, a drinking fountain north of the clubhouse patio, and a custom flagpole built by John Armstrong, SYC’s first commodore. They also moved the gate at the top of the area access road to the entrance to the current boatyard, opening the area for public vehicle access. This cut the SYC area into two partitions, the clubhouse to the north, the boatyard to the south, separated by a public access area in between. As a result, much of SYC’s historic home site of 50 years that club members had put so much time, effort and money into developing for the benefit of the local sailing community was repurposed as a general public access area. What distinguished the area as a yacht club was effectively erased.

Eventually P+R replaced the extensive old wood docks built by SYC with much shorter low-maintenance plastic docks. Years later, when electric power to the garden area was run underground, electric power and lighting for the SYC area were removed, leaving the area

completely dark at night. A nearby freshwater hydrant was also disconnected when garden irrigation was reworked. When the wood stairs to the dock off the patio burned, P+R eventually rebuilt the stairs, but they removed the long wood benches built by SYC that had been integrated with the stair railings to provide lots of convenient patio seating.

The public area between the clubhouse and the boatyard went from being a central gathering place for the sailing community to just another spot for public fishing and occasionally someone launching a boat or kayak at the small boat ramp. The area also became a magnet for illicit activity, e.g., pot smoking, drug dealing, hoodlums, thieves, routinely strewn with trash, garbage, used condoms, and even human feces. One SYC member's child picked up a used condom thinking it was a balloon. Individuals and groups gathered in the area made it a threatening environment, especially in the evening or at night. No longer was it that safe, inviting, family-friendly place but rather a place to be avoided.

All the illicit activity in the public area also made the SYC storage shed and boatyard common targets for thieves. In early 2022, thieves stole a boat trailer and two wheels off another trailer. In 2021, 4 trailer wheels and the club pontoon boat trailer were stolen -- leaving no way to get the club pontoon boats in and out of the water. In 2000, thieves ripped a hole in the siding of the storage shed to get in, unlocked the door from within, and stole a rowboat, an outboard motor, and a kayak. In an earlier episode 6 aluminum rudders were stolen off boats with a replacement cost of \$675 each. Multiple aluminum rowboats, trolling motors, gas tanks, batteries, keys to the pontoon boats have all been lost to thieves. In the years following 1996, when the area was first opened to public vehicle access, SYC and its members suffered many thousands of dollars in losses to thieves and vandals, leading many members to go elsewhere for sailing.

Prior to 1996, the clubhouse served as the center of activity for social gatherings, meetings, a place to greet visitors and watch sailing activity on the water. And it was furnished, as you would expect, in a nautical theme to fit that role with sailing trophies, framed sailing photos, club memorabilia, etc. But with the conversion of the interior for general public use and with the public area separating the clubhouse from the sailing activity in the boatyard, the clubhouse lost all association with SYC. Despite the remaining "Shawnee Yacht Club" sign, the clubhouse became known simply as just another small public rental facility.

Losing direct control of the clubhouse was a huge handicap for SYC. Since the public could make reservations as far as one year ahead, and it was difficult for SYC to nail down a schedule that far in advance, we were left to find dates when it was available. Unlike the simple online reservation system used by the public, SYC's process for making reservations wasn't well defined and was often cumbersome and time consuming for everyone involved. And, without direct control, impromptu use of the clubhouse by SYC was impossible. No other area sailing club had this handicap. They all had dedicated structures of their own, including the Lake Shawnee Boat & Ski Club and the Topeka Rowing Association.

Around 2016, when construction started on the Hanger Family Preserve just west and above the SYC boatyard, truckloads of fill material were brought in to construct a raised overlook area and, in the process, much of the boatyard drainage ditch became blocked. Heavy rains then caused large volumes of dirt and water to flood the boatyard, leaving it covered with dirt and weeds instead of gravel, and largely unusable when rains washing down from the Hanger Preserve construction area above turned the boatyard into a muddy mess.

Years of neglect in the area left sections of concrete patio teetering on the edge, threatening to slide into the lake, a shoreline adjacent to the small boat ramp washed out leaving much of the ramp pavement unsupported, and excessive tall brush all along the shoreline.

Anyone considering joining SYC, all those who came out for the sailing lessons, etc. could see that SYC's facilities were in dire condition, limited to a small storage shed, a boat ramp, a couple of docks and a boatyard in poor condition. They found no dedicated structure for shade, for shelter from the elements and for social gatherings, no security for boats and equipment, no electric power, lights, or running water – basic features of any sailing facility. They expected to find more at a yacht club that's been operating since 1941. They expected more, considering the quality of other Lake Shawnee facilities. Most moved on and took up sailing at other area sailing venues with much better facilities.

Despite the dismantling of the SYC facilities, for a number of years there were still enough veteran SYC members to continue with some racing and regattas. There were even some relatively good years with the Sunflower State Games Regattas and the Shawnee Heights Navy Junior ROTC sailing program. But, as the years went by, most of the veteran members retired from sailing. When there were too few left, the regattas, and even the racing, eventually ended.

The Comeback

Why has SYC been unable to rebuild membership to levels approaching the heydays of the 1960s through the 1980s? The decline in sailing that occurred back in the 1990s has never fully recovered. But other area sailing clubs are doing quite well with membership, regular racing, and regattas. The obvious reason for the difference is that those other area sailing clubs did not see their facilities dismantled and allowed to deteriorate like SYC. They, instead, improved their facilities, like adding secure, fenced boat storage, to help attract and retain more sailors, and recover from the downturn.

Lake Shawnee has tremendous potential to restore small boat sailing to the level of the heydays with weekly racing, monthly regattas, hosting of national regattas, a return of that popular, safe, secure, comfortable place for families raising their kids to be sailors. The makings for such a yacht club are still there at the original historic site on Yacht Court. Lake Shawnee's very convenient access, moderate size, north/south orientation (matching the prevailing winds), extensive no-wake area and consistent water level make it ideal for small boat sailing.

Sailing is still commonly associated with Lake Shawnee, with the frequent use of sailboats in P+R publication photos, [website photos](#), and in signage. There is still a lot of local interest in sailing as indicated by the significant number of folks who come out for the weekly sailing lessons. There are still several experienced veteran SYC members on board, eager to help, including one of the premier sailboat racers in the Midwest in Mark Marling. SYC has already secured some private funding to help with expenses and can do more, although the fix should not require a huge investment.



In recent years, the few remaining veteran members have been making every effort to attract new sailors each season offering weekly sailing lessons for free or just a token charge. The club also began maintaining a number of club-owned boats. Members can use these boats to save the expense and hassle of owning a boat of their own and some are available for purchase to help new members get started sailing with their own boat. With these efforts, the club has been able to maintain annual membership at about 30 to 35 families. But more active members are needed to bring back regular racing and regattas.

Beginning in late 2021 P+R began to make some improvements in the area. Trees were trimmed to allow boats with masts up to be moved about the area. The very old wood dock adjacent to the boat launching ramps was replaced with a smaller new plastic dock. Tall brush along the shoreline was cleared. And the deteriorated clubhouse patio was replaced. In the fall of 2022 P+R regraded the boatyard, cleaned out the drainage ditch and spread new gravel, reversing the damage done by the Hanger Family Preserve construction. They also arranged for a new boatyard security light. And SYC and P+R jointly planned and funded the installation of new security fencing around the boatyard. 2022 also brought a number of new club members willing to serve on the board and help the club recover.

But more is needed to restore the facilities and environment to help get sailing activity back to the level of the heydays:

1. When the new fence was installed around the boatyard in the fall of 2022, a new gate was also installed at the top of the area access road to block vehicle traffic down into the area. P+R's intent is for this gate to be shut only when SYC is holding an event. This should be helpful to avoid conflict with other activity during our events.

But taking the next step and shutting this gate all the time to block public vehicle access to the area would finally re-establish SYC's historic site and go a long way toward restoring the area as an attractive, safe, secure venue for the sailing community, instead of it being dangerous and a magnet for illicit activity, vandalism, and thievery. It would finally get us back to a single contiguous area designated to support sailing, an attribute all other area sailing clubs and other venues around the lake take for granted.

P+R has been reluctant to take this next step considering the current relatively low SYC membership level. Of course, other than the fenced in area for boat storage, the public would continue to have full access to the area. They could continue to park in the parking lot and walk down to the docks and shore to fish, as many do now. They just couldn't drive their vehicles down the access road to park adjacent to the shoreline. But there are other locations around the lake where they can continue to do that.

2. Return clubhouse control to SYC so we would once again have a dedicated gathering place like all other area sailing clubs and other venues around the lake, including the Boat & Ski Club and the Topeka Rowing Association. The clubhouse would once again serve as the center of activity for social gatherings, meetings, a place to greet visitors and watch sailing activity on the water. And it could again be furnished with sailing trophies, framed photos, club memorabilia, etc. No longer would we have to reserve clubhouse dates over a year in advance.

3. Level off, gravel, and fence in parking spots for boats between the clubhouse and the current boatyard around the perimeter of the existing paved area and along the north side of the ravine. This would get the boats and boating activity more in public view where it would help attract new members and make the area look more like an active sailing club. It would also allow boating activity to be more integrated with clubhouse use, providing family and friends a place to socialize and watch the sailing, which would, in turn, bring out more sailing participants. In other words, this would help restore the area as a place for sailors, family and friends to spend time together, as it was in the heydays.
4. Restore electric power, lighting, and a freshwater hydrant to the area, restore landscaping around the clubhouse, address the washed-out shoreline adjacent to the small boat ramp and the ramp pavement that's unsupported.

These improvements are not intended to simply support the current SYC membership level. They are intended to help SYC membership and Lake Shawnee sailing activity grow back to a level approaching the heydays, when the lake was routinely full of sailboats, drawing sailors from across the Midwest, and a return of that popular, safe, comfortable place for families raising their kids to be sailors.

Respectfully submitted,

Mike Gorman
SYC Governor (property, website, P+R liaison)