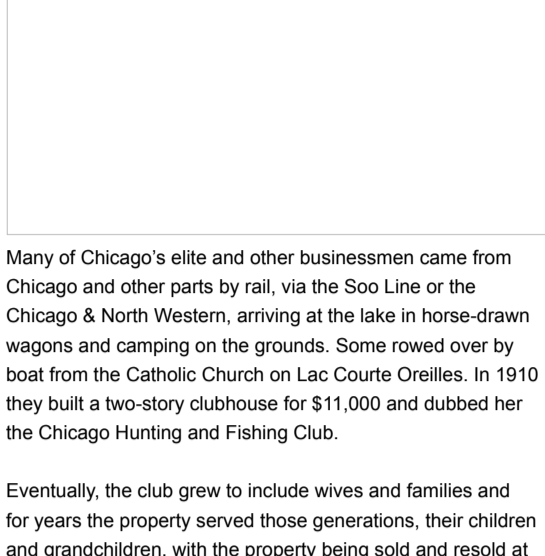


## 'The finest of the northwest' — the Old Chicago Club holds her sway 105 years later

By Kathy Hanson  
Contributing Writer

Her history is the stuff of legends, romance, and beauty—part Camelot fantasy, part Hyannis Port/ Kennedy-esque compound. Old photos attest to that, as do the people who once filled the rooms with family, friends, guests and summer parties on the sandy beaches overlooking Lac Courte Oreilles.

Constructed at the turn of the 20th century, sources cite 1904 as the year it was built, with Frank Jackson as the contractor. Originally, it was an all-men's club, with each member having to be voted on by the other private members. All members either owned or leased a bedroom and shared the costs of running the club.



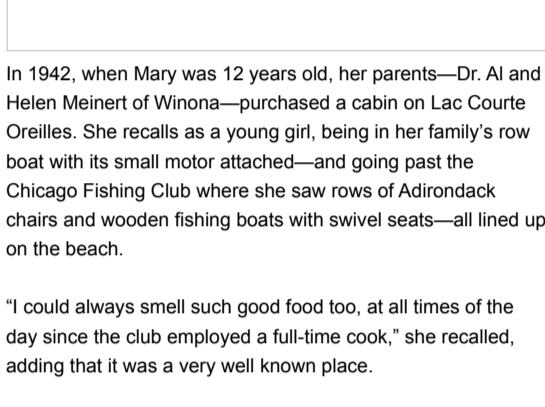
Many of Chicago's elite and other businessmen came from Chicago and other parts by rail, via the Soo Line or the Chicago & North Western, arriving at the lake in horse-drawn wagons and camping on the grounds. Some rowed over by boat from the Catholic Church on Lac Courte Oreilles. In 1910 they built a two-story clubhouse for \$11,000 and dubbed her the Chicago Hunting and Fishing Club.

Eventually, the club grew to include wives and families and for years the property served those generations, their children and grandchildren, with the property being sold and resold at least several times.

### Tom and Mary Austin

In the fall of 1968 four parties came together to purchase the property: Tom Austin, Tom Duffy Sr., Bob Fairfield and Harry Moeller. After the sale was completed they all agreed to certain architectural and usage requirements, allowing only new construction for privately custom-built lake cabins.

That winter a man from Eau Claire made an offer to purchase the lodge and a portion of the lakeshore property. His plans were to use it as a trailer camp. The Austin's matched his offer, and in 1970 they purchased it from the other three owners.



In 1942, when Mary was 12 years old, her parents—Dr. Al and Helen Meinert of Winona—purchased a cabin on Lac Courte Oreilles. She recalls as a young girl, being in her family's row boat with its small motor attached—and going past the Chicago Fishing Club where she saw rows of Adirondack chairs and wooden fishing boats with swivel seats—all lined up on the beach.

"I could always smell such good food too, at all times of the day since the club employed a full-time cook," she recalled, adding that it was a very well known place.

Tom and Mary married in 1951 and raised five children in the St. Paul area where Tom was an oral surgeon (now retired). In 1968 they built their own lake home on the southern shoreline of the middle bay of Lac Courte Oreilles.

Tom said, "Of all our friends and acquaintances on Lac Courte Oreilles, Mary holds the record of having spent 73 continuous summers at the lake."

The Austin ties and their families to Lac Courte Oreilles run deep. In the past five years, Tom and Mary have made their lake home their permanent residence.

As owners of the Old Chicago Club (it was renamed that when the Austin's purchased it), their overriding concern was always, quite simply, preservation. And so they became stewards who determined they would save the majestic Chicago Club from the mean fate of becoming a camper-trailer park. They did just that and more.

In the beginning they rented it out to multi-family groups who understood what it represented and who came back year after year, one week at a time, for 25 years. Tom said, "We used it for sailboat regattas, weddings, church retreats and for at least 10 years hosted mini-reunions for our close friends of the Rochester 1947 high school class."

Many gala occasions and events were held on those shores from May through October. It came at a cost. The Austin's hired different caretakers, some of them very trustworthy and dedicated, but not all. It was a struggle they gladly took on—managing all the people it took to run it. Through the years, they maintained it, kept it as close to its historical bones as possible, adding a new roof, septic system, and making other repairs and updates as needed, all the while considering the need to conserve and preserve.

"The first winter all the boats and motors were stolen—even the beautiful dinner bell," Mary said.

In an old 1994 yearly flier the Austin's mailed out to guests/friends every summer, they described The Old Chicago Club:

"This quaint old Victorian summer hotel accommodates 30 plus people in 17 bedrooms. The six full bathrooms (three on each floor) are in the continental style, located at the end of the hall. There is a large, fully equipped kitchen and dining room. Maid service occurs during occupancy changes, and the building and premises, during periods of vacancy, are in the process of being restored and are kept as clean and neat as possible."

Mary said a large kitchen occupied most of the main floor of a two-story building attached to the northwest corner of the lodge. It was connected to the dining room by a butler's pantry. A business office, employee dining area and back screen porch made up the remainder of its main floor. The porch contained a sink and work area to clean fish, and an exposed stairway to the second floor.

Living quarters upstairs consisted of three bedrooms and a full bathroom for live-in employees. A knotty pine living room with a huge wood-burning fireplace and two large bedrooms on the second floor were added onto the east side of the lodge shortly after it was built, Mary recalled.

In 1999, Tom and Mary sold the Old Chicago Club. They had owned it 30 years, carefully preserving and tending it, but it was time to say goodbye as owners and move on.

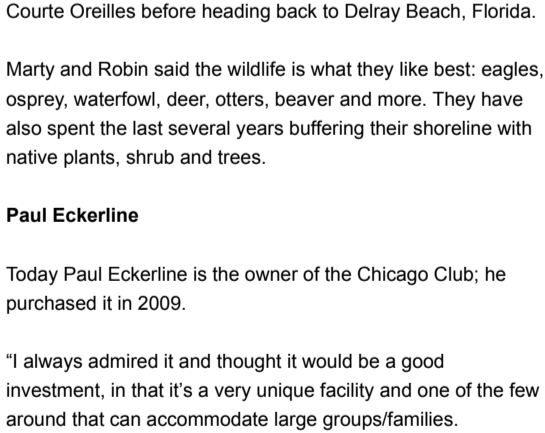
Today, it is obvious that Tom and Mary still love it and hold it in high esteem as a marker of what used to be a much "gentler, easier time," to quote a phrase from "The Tales of Lac Courte Oreilles" by Tom and Sue Burgess."

### Buzz and Barb Babbitt

Buzz and Barb Babbitt became the new owners in 1999. Buzz was born in Bloomer, Wisconsin and Barb in St. Paul; they had vacationed in the New Auburn area for years and had a cabin on an island lake in Haugen, Wisconsin. They found island life challenging and looked for something else—which they found in the Chicago Club.

Their son-in-law Marty—married to daughter Robin—said Buzz and Barb made some "serious remodeling and renovations" to the building and used it as their summer home, along with their three children and their families.

"There were 17 of us that enjoyed the Club during those years," Marty said. In fact, the grandkids spent a lot of their formative years summering at the Chicago Club. He recalls having a bear costume they would get out every summer to scare unsuspecting visitors sitting around the campfire. "Some still have nightmares about bears," said Marty.



The family lived and worked in Tampa, Florida and getting to and from Hayward was a chore, according to Marty. In 2005 the Babbitts decided to sell the club and bought a place in the mountains of North Carolina, a much easier drive to and from Tampa.

Buzz passed away in 2007 and Barb in 2011, but Robin and Marty loved it up here so much that they kept the Caretakers Cabin, about 35 feet from the water's edge to the east, and they continue to enjoy it today, along with their children and grandchildren.

In August 2013 Marty and Robin held the wedding of their daughter Lindsay at the Chicago Club, with the wedding right on the shore and the reception on the lawn. Today Marty and Robin are retired; they spend May through October on Lac Courte Oreilles before heading back to Delray Beach, Florida.

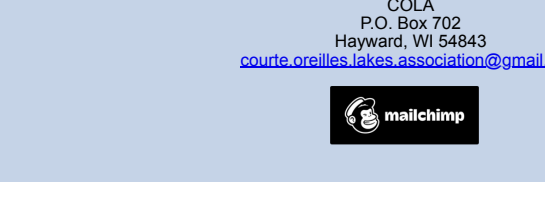
Marty and Robin said the wildlife is what they like best: eagles, osprey, waterfowl, deer, otters, beaver and more. They have also spent the last several years buffering their shoreline with native plants, shrub and trees.

### Paul Eckerline

Today Paul Eckerline is the owner of the Chicago Club; he purchased it in 2009.

"I always admired it and thought it would be a good investment, in that it's a very unique facility and one of the few around that can accommodate large groups/families.

Eckerline said for years he has bought small cabins, fixed them up and then rented them out. "Over the years the competition has grown. The Old Chicago Club has very little competition," said Eckerline.



The Old Chicago Club continues to be the gathering place for special events, such as vacations, reunions, weddings, church retreats, corporate planning meetings, girls' weekends, bachelorette parties, fishing and golfing weekends and holidays, including a large family who rent it in early December for an old-fashioned Christmas.

Eckerline said donations to various charities have been made on behalf of the clubs and their fundraising auctions.

*Kathy Hanson is a free-lance reporter for the Sawyer County Gazette, the Sawyer County Field Editor for Our Wisconsin magazine, and Copy Editor for the Bayfield County Journal. She has also served as Staff Reporter, Business Feature Writer, Columnist, and Copy Editor for the Sawyer County Record.*

If you haven't already done so, please [renew](#) your COLA membership for 2015. Thanks for your support!

Learn more about COLA on Facebook or the COLA website:

*"Many of Chicago and New York's Jewish elite came to the Chicago Club to enjoy the outdoors and fishing, and usually hired American Indian guides. Distinguished guests, such as Chicago philanthropists Max Adler and his brother-in-law Julius Rosenwald, chairman of the board of Sears Roebuck, Co., frequented the club. Adler gave Chicago its famous Adler Planetarium, and Rosenwald contributed*

*the city's magnificent Museum of Science and Industry."*

*--From Wisconsin Outdoor Journal, "Yesteryear Hideaways," Fishing Annual 2000.*

## NOTICES

### Upper Couderay River Watershed

[more information](#)

### COLA releases its Total Maximum Daily Load Report

[more information](#)

### COLA finalizes its strategy to address the future health of our lakes

[more information](#)

### Help COLA spread the good news - Like us on Facebook & share COLA's posts

### Native Aquatic Plants are Good!

Native aquatic plants play a key role in the ecology of a lake. They can help to maintain water quality, prevent shoreline erosion and provide habitat for a wide diversity of species from fish to amphibians to mammals. A few things to note about aquatic plant control in our lakes:

1. It is illegal to use any herbicide on aquatic native plants unless a permit is obtained from the WDNR.

2. The maximum area someone can hand pull or rake aquatic plants is 30 feet by their dock or along their shore. If more area is to be cleared, a WDNR permit is required. Plants must be removed from the water and disposed of on land.

3. Eurasian Water Milfoil (EWM) has been found in Little LCO. Invasive plants like Curly Leaf Pondweed (CLP) or EWM can be hand pulled without a permit. In fact, immediate action is encouraged to limit weed increase. However, CLP and EWM can spread by plant fragments, so great care is needed to remove all plant material.

Some helpful resources for hand-pulling EWM can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

### Are your neighbors and extended family members of COLA?

If not, please ask them to [join](#).

### Support COLA by contributing to the Lac Courte Oreilles Foundation

### Why "Short Ears, ...?"

Lac Courte Oreilles, or Lake Short Ears, was the name used by the first French traders who visited what was then known as Ottawa Lake. A local band of Ottawas observed the custom of cutting off a portion of their ears.

### Tales of Lac Courte Oreilles

This book, edited by Tom and Sue Burgess, together with COLA's history committee, compiled a detailed history of Lac Courte Oreilles. The book is available through [COLA](#) and the Sherman & Ruth Weiss Community Library in Hayward.

### History Comes Alive

This 2004 publication, compiled and written by Caryll A. Pfaff and Ann Marie Penskov, is a compilation of community and history center photographs available from the [Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa Community Library](#).

### Archived issues of Short Ears, Long Tales

**COLA Mission:** 1) to protect, preserve and enhance the quality of Lac Courte Oreilles and Little Lac Courte Oreilles, their shorelands and surrounding areas, while respecting the interests of property owners and the rights of the general public; and 2) to consider, study, survey and respond to issues deemed relevant by COLA's membership.

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