



History of the Hamilton Victoria Club

The Hamilton Victoria Curling Club holds the distinction of being the oldest continuously operating sporting organization in the city of Hamilton as well as being amongst one of the oldest curling clubs in the province of Ontario and Canada.

The Hamilton Victoria Club, in past years, was a multifaceted sporting facility, operating as a lawn bowling club, figure skating club, and even hockey has been played on its ice, but today is exclusively recognized as a curling club. Many years have been spent in this “grand historic building” which has seen many changes throughout its long and varied history.

The origins of the Hamilton Victoria Club began in 1867 in a one-story building, built by the Wanzer Company as a molding shop of the manufacturing parts for their famous sewing machines. The site was located at the northwest corner of Main and Catherine Street, with the members room fronting on Main Street and the rink, consisting of 4 sheets of ice, extending north along Catherine Street.

The originating members registered the club with the Ontario Curling Association, adopting the name Hamilton Mechanics Club. The members curled under the banner of the Hamilton Mechanics Club from 1867 through the 1880/1881 curling season.

Following the 1880/1881 season, club members decided to change the name of the club and in October 1881, registered their new name with the Ontario Curling Association as the Hamilton Caledonian Club. Members continued to curl, occupying 2 sheets at the Hamilton Mechanics Club from 1881 through the 1890/1891 season.

With rapidly increasing membership and an up-to-date board of directors, the members, in the spring of 1890, decided they required more spacious accommodations. For this purpose, the members elected to apply to the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario for a charter (Letters Patent) and obtain land for the location of new club facilities.

In October of 1890, the charter was granted, and land was purchased for the construction of the new club. Under the charter of 1890, the club officially became the Victoria Curling Rink, Company of Hamilton (Limited). This was the first time in the club's history that the current title name “Victoria” was documented.

The newly purchased land was located at the top of Victoria Avenue, fronting on Young Street, with sufficient area for bowling greens, lawn tennis, and curling and skating rinks. A two-story brick building was erected with ample space for club members' social activities as well as 3 sheets of ice in a one-story addition in the rear. The new building was officially opened in the fall of 1891 by then president, Mr. John Hoodless.

Although the club had a new charter name, the newly constructed club facilities were not named under it, as the members decided to retain the name Hamilton Caledonian Club.

IN 1890, the club remained registered with the Ontario Curling Association as the Hamilton Caledonian Club. It was not until the fall of 1891 that the club was registered as the Hamilton Victoria Club while retaining the officially chartered name, Victoria Curling Rink Company of Hamilton (Limited).

After a few successful seasons, a brick skating rink was built facing Stinson Street.

In the early 1890's, membership started falling off, and the club received a very tempting offer from the Union Drawn Steel Company for their property, subsequently selling it to them in 1904. For this 1905 curling season, the club members were without a home so about a dozen younger members decided to curl at the Hamilton Thistle Club.

Fortunately, in the spring of 1906, Mr. Lou Johnston and Mr. James Dixon were able to raise the funds to secure an option on the land at the club's current location. Subsequently, then president, Mr. James Dixon, along with the club directors, secured contracts under the club's charter, with capital stocks of \$20,000 for the construction of a 4-sheet brick curling rink with a one-story club room in front for members.

The new club building and facilities were completed and ready to open in the winter of 1906 for skating and in January 1907 for curling. The informal opening ceremony, presided over by the newly elected club president Mr. A. M. Cunningham, was preceded by a successful season with a membership of 110.

All went well for the next 20 years until a few mild winters caused membership to dwindle. Due to less ice time, the board of directors and members decided to look into installing the first artificial ice plant in the area. Prior to 1927 and the installation of an artificial ice plan, the club was at the mercy of Mother Nature to provide natural ice to curl and skate on.

In 1927, mainly due to overburdening taxes incurred by the club, the club members decided to apply to the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario for the surrender of the 1890 charter and request a new charter. At this time, it was advisable to install an artificial ice making plant to prolong the curling season and amalgamate the Victoria Lawn Bowling Club, who since 1908 had their own separate charter, so that both lawn bowling and curling activities would be controlled under one management. It was also recommended that the club premises be expanded to provide more suitable accommodations for the members.

That same year, a new charter for the club was granted under the name Hamilton Victoria Club Limited, along with the previous charter assets and liabilities. In addition, an artificial ice making plant was installed and both the combined curling and bowling members secured subscriptions for the enlargement of the club members quarters. Under then president, Mr. John A. Torrance, and board of directors contracts were secured, and the addition was completed.

The newly renovated club facilities opened to skaters in late October 1927 and the curlers January 2, 1928. For several years, large revenues were derived from skating and the curling membership rose to 150.

In 1928, the members decided to purchase an additional 50 feet of land to the east of the club for more bowling greens (where we currently have a parking lot).

Sadly, because of the increasing popularity of golf, badminton, roller skating and dancing, the number of bowlers in the summer and skaters in the winter decreased. But, within a few years, curling and lawn bowling saw an upswing and additions and alterations were made to the club.

With the advent of women's curling in 1934, more changes needed to be made. Most of the women who started curling were already members of the lawn bowling club. Mrs. Agnes Gooch was the first elected president of the newly formed ladies' section, followed by Dr. Elizabeth Bagshaw, who was instrumental in initiating the first mixed curling bonspiel in the city, held at the Vic in 1935.

Although women were now curling, there was still a "no women beyond this point" policy in the bar area. Their orders were taken through a window at the bar, and they received their drinks in the same manner.

Regular bonspiels were held with the women from the Hamilton Thistle Club and many Victorian Teas followed these events, as most were held during the daytime.

Change takes time and change in attitude started in the club in 1957 when Mrs. Florence Marney became the first woman elected to the executive board of directors, as secretary. This led the way for Mrs. Chantal Lount to be elected the first woman president of the Vic in 1997. Since that initial gender breakthrough, the club has had many dedicated and competent women take prominent positions on the board of directors, including the office of president.

The club has boasted many excellent competitive women curlers. In the early 50's, they regularly competed in the Ontario Curling Association's sanctioned bonspiels with great success, many times playing in the coveted Ontario Ladies Tankard playdowns and often playing in the championship finals. One of the club's most accomplished female curlers was Mrs. Lee Squires, who was chosen from across all of Ontario to travel to Scotland as one of the four team members to proudly represent the province as part of the Canadian contingency, and curl against teams from Scotland.

The addition of women's curling, as time has shown, brought a new dimension of strength to the club.

The Vic has had a long and mutually beneficial relationship with the Dofasco Curling Club. From its inception in 1942, the Dofasco club has rented ice and curled continuously up to this day at the Vic. The Ontario Curling Association records show the Dofasco Curling Club officially registered with their association in 1951. Over the years, the Dofasco Curling Club has become an integral part of the Vic, as many of the Dofasco club members have also joined the Vic club as members.

On February 24th, 1945, a fire broke out in the attached members quarters which destroyed many historic papers and pictures. As part of the damage repairs, a second story was added to the building.

During the 1946/1947 curling season, all curling members were charged a \$3 rock fee for 3 years in preparation to buy new curling stones from Elsa Craig Scotland. Unfortunately, the ship transporting the rocks sank during its Trans-Atlantic crossing. It would be a few more years before the club would receive the new curling stones.

Due to increasing taxes, in 1950, the club members decided to again apply to the Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario for the surrender of the 1927 charter and request a new charter. A new charter was granted by the Provincial Secretary of the Province of Ontario on August 10th, 1950, with assets and liabilities of the Hamilton Victoria Club Limited transferred to the newly chartered Hamilton Victoria Club, the name the

club is currently known as. Having the new charter also paved the way for the club to become a not-for-profit organization.

In 1967, along with Canada's Centennial year of celebrations, the Vic also celebrated its 100th anniversary. The 100th anniversary celebrations started on January 2nd with an opening birthday party for all members, then continued with many special events throughout the year. The years' celebrations ended with a final event cocktail party for all club members and their spouses on December 23rd.

With the establishment of more locally situated curling clubs, which had both golf and curling facilities, lawn bowling at the club dwindled and eventually closed. In 1969, the property of the lawn bowling greens to the west were sold.

Once again, with growing membership, due to the addition of a business women's league, mixed curling leagues, and the changes in liquor laws, it was time again to expand the club's quarters. This new addition was what today is known as the 9th end lounge. Most of the materials and manpower to complete the addition were supplied by the members themselves, as there was a heavy presence of Hamilton Construction Association workers within the club membership. The new addition was opened in 1976 by Mr. W. F. (Bill) Inrig and Dr. Elizabeth Bagshaw presiding over a formal opening ceremony.

In 2017, the Vic celebrated its sesquicentennial anniversary, 150 amazing years. The 2017 curling season was filled with memories of club members and events of past years. Numerous special events were organized throughout the year, including the hosting of the U18 Men's and Women's Provincial Curling Championships, a hugely successful endeavour. The 150th anniversary celebrations culminated with a spectacular "Grand Gala" held March 31st in the King George Ballroom at Hamilton's Liuna Station.

Starting in the fall of 2019, the next few seasons of curling proved to be extremely challenging to the overall operations of the club.

The Vic was forced to close its doors for the entire 2019/2020 curling season due to the discovery of major ammonia leaks in the ice plant piping. Upon further investigation, it was found that the aging chiller tanks were also compromised, both requiring replacements.

The board of directors of the club immediately proceeded to put a plan in place for the replacement of all the ammonia piping and the installation of a new plant chiller. Once all the insurance requirements were met, installation quotes tendered, and TSSA approval authorized, replacement of work began in anticipation of being completed in time for the opening of the 2020/2021 curling season.

During the club's closure of the 2019/2020 curling seasons, members joined or rented ice at other local curling clubs.

In late January 2020, Covid-19, a global pandemic, was detected and surging in North America, forcing all local curling clubs to curtail their 2019/2020 curling season and close in the middle of March 2020.

With the Covid-19 virus still looming over the country and with the installations completed to the club's ice plant, the Vic's board of directors made the decision to open the club for the upcoming 2020/2021 curling season. This came with the understanding and acceptance by the club members that their registration fees would cover the costs of installing the ice, and with the possibility of being reimbursed only 50% of their registration fees, if for any reason the club was forced to close because of government mandated Covid-19 restrictions.

During the next two curling seasons, 2020/2021 and 2021/2022, the club was forced to operate under the devastating effects of the Covid-19 pandemic surges, experiencing multiple closures and lockdowns due to the restrictive government occupancy mandates. The times the club was allowed to open after closures and lockdowns it did so, under strict vaccination, tracing, masking, distancing, sanitizing, and game curling protocols set up by the various levels of government and Ontario Curling Association recommendations.

Following the final lockdown from mid-December 2021 to the end of January 2022, the government's restrictive mandates were eased. Still under protective Covid-19 protocols, the club was again allowed to open its doors and successfully completed the 2021/2022 curling season with a guarded anticipation that the worst of the pandemic restrictions were behind them and with the expectancy of a more normal future going forward into the next curling season.

The Vic members confidently go forward into the future with pride for what the "Hamilton Victoria Club" was presented and stood for all these years.