

Legacy of the Punta Gorda Boat Club

By Bill Hempel

Nestled on a small point of land and surrounded on three sides by water, The Punta Gorda Boat Club sits at the South end of Retta Esplanade next to the Bay Front Center. This unique little club has a fascinating history and should set an example for our City and County Fathers as to what can be accomplished through citizen and municipal cooperation. This Club and its 400 members came into being through an unusual cooperation and exists today offering a boating and social venue to be envied, while continuing to give back to the community through many civic endeavors.



The Punta Gorda Boat Club (PGBC) was founded in 1951 in response to a vision of the local Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber's one part time employee wanted to promote tourism by creating a new image of water sports and recreation to compliment the then dominate cattle and fishing industry. A committee was formed, including the Editor-publisher of the Punta Gorda Herald, I.L. (Brownie) Brown. The committee was given a budget of \$1,200 dollars with the objective of bringing an APBA (American Power Boat Association) sanctioned Regatta to Charlotte Harbor. The APBA was willing but indicated that their rules required sponsorship by a bona fide boat club. So John Rose, president of the Chamber, gathered up 56 residents of Charlotte County and in July, 1951, formed the Punta Gorda Boat Club, of which he was immediately elected Commodore.

On February 29, 1952 The Regatta was held, followed by a regatta ball. A crowd of 8,000 to 9,000

turned out to see twenty two top drivers compete in the six class event. With speeds over 80 miles per hour and thrilling crashes, the crowd was ecstatic and over 400 turned out that night for the grand ball. Charlotte Counties entry into the world of recreational tourism was successfully launched and the PGBC was born.

During the succeeding years the PGBC continued to grow and to conduct successful regattas. A 1957 regatta attracted 145 boats and over 300 support people. The Club met at the old American Legion Hall, across from the Laishly trailer park, affectionately called Tin City. The Club had regularly held outings on island 33, in the Peace River and had cleared the island and built shelters and benches there. The owner, Brigadier General Robert Douglas, USAF, wouldn't sell the island but stated that the PGBC would have first right to refusal to buy the island upon his death. Unfortunately an "enterprising" realtor contacted the heirs and sold the property out from under them.

In 1958 the PGBC was still seeking a meeting place, and focused on its current location, a piece of City property on Retta Esplanade, at the end of Berry Street. The marsh site was completely covered with water at high tide, but was a perfect location. This site was used to manufacture fish fertilizer in the late 1800's and by 1902 large foundations had been put in place to support the heavy equipment. Large pyramidal piers were poured to support a 100 foot dock that extended the width of the property. The structure built was called "The Yellow Barn" by locals. Unfortunately everything was ripped out by a hurricane and by the 1950's all that remained were large foundation blocks and some 50 dock piers, all under water.

The PGBC approached the City Council in 1961 with plans to build a sea wall, back fill the land, and erect a building. The City approved the plan and granted the Club a land lease with an ongoing renewable clause. With a minimal budget, the Club tackled the project. Club members did the actual work, and moved the old foundation blocks and pier supports to form a seawall. Local businessmen donated equipment and materials to back fill the land to an acceptable height and pour the

foundations for a building. Building construction was a cooperative effort, with help from all sectors. The partitions were built by members of the Volunteer Fire Department in appreciation for Club support of some of their activities. In October, 1962, the first meetings were held in the current building. A Club that was born to serve the community had now been firmly established through the cooperation of the community.

Over the past 40 plus years the Club has gone through many phases, from sponsoring power boat regattas to running a Bingo Hall. Today it is one of the premier boating Clubs in our area. For many years there was a two year waiting list to join the Club, due to the 400 member cap that is dictated by building size. Currently the formation of so many new cruising clubs has reduced the waiting list to 30 to 60 days. To this day the PGBC maintains its history of being a working club. Members maintain the site and building as well as prepare the food for dinner parties. Amazingly participating in these “work sessions” is not a requirement of the membership, yet every event is easily staffed with volunteers. The membership works together more as a family than a Club and what appears to an outsider as work is in reality a bonding social function.



The Club runs three types of cruising programs. There are local day trips, basically for smaller boats; short and long term overnight trips, for larger power boats; and short and long term over-nighters for trawlers and sailboats as well as a sail racing program. There is generally at least one cruise per month in each category and the events are well attended with almost 60 % of the mem-

bership having participated in one or more cruises this past season.

On the social side, the club holds monthly dinner/business meetings, cocktail (attitude adjustment) parties, and theme parties. There are regular organized outings ranging from local dinner theater to a 10 day Caribbean cruise. Of course the ladies must have their weekly Mah Jongg games. Since the events are staged by members, the costs are very low. \$10 to \$12.00 is the norm for social events, including dinner with dessert and beverage.

The Club continues its legacy of giving back to the community. Excess food from all events as well as canned food donations are gathered and delivered to local shelters. Annual boating outings are held for people with “special needs”. The PGBC “hosts” the Lion Clubs annual fund raising breakfast. The Club has adopted Ponce Park and the parts of the Peace River for the annual shore clean-up, and many other civic programs.

One major requirement of membership is that you must own a boat to join. While membership in the Club is through “invitation only”, this really means instead of an application form you need a current member to submit your name. A membership requires a one time initiation fee of \$250.00 per person followed by individual annual dues of \$75.00. If you have an interest in knowing more about the Punta Gorda Boat Club you can check out their activities at their web site. You may also call the current membership co-chairpersons, Penny Stiffler at 575-2969 or Claire Manzo at 575-7745. Penny or Claire can arrange a preview of the Club and can probably identify someone you know in the club that could sponsor you.

The Punta Gorda Boat Club is really an extraordinary cruising Club. Its rich history sets an example of community and civic cooperation from which our current leaders can learn. Its many boating, social, and civic projects provide members a myriad of options, all at a low cost, and from a setting with an incredible water view. The Club does a great job of meeting its mission of extending a hand of friendship to new boaters in the area and assisting them in safe enjoyable boating activities.