

THE BRIDGEPORT RIFLE CLUB

A 90 YEAR HISTORY

1917 - 2007

The first meeting of the Bridgeport Rifle Club took place at the University Club in Bridgeport on March 21, 1917. At this meeting the following prominent business men were elected as officers:

President: Samuel P. Senior

Vice-President: Frank Hunt

Executive Officer: David S. Day

Secretary: Harris L. O'Brien

Treasurer: Horace Merwin

Advisory Board: Norman Leeds, William Webster, & Clinton V. Seeley.

The secretary was authorized to make a formal application for membership in the National Rifle Association. Unfortunately, at some point in the 90 year history of the Club, this membership was not renewed for a period of time so the Club has not had a continuous membership in the N.R.A.

Many members of this new club had been shooting at various locations, mostly in the basements of private homes, and Bridgeport had many enthusiastic rifle supporters. Forerunners of the Bridgeport Rifle Club were the Park Club and the Pequonnock Club which operated for a few years. Many world records were made or broken by the Park Club. A group of workers from Remington Arms also organized as a club briefly seeing that the company offered its employees quarters and equipment. This club even had a prospect for an outdoor range. These plans changed three days after the lease was signed and the property instead became the site for the now vacant General Electric Company on Boston Avenue in Bridgeport.

One purpose of the Bridgeport Rifle Club was to act as a Home Guard Unit because the war had taken the National Guard Unit and there was no military organization located in Bridgeport. The members were to be uniformed and they were required to drill at least twice a week until they became proficient. After that, target practice was required once a week. Members were equipped with rifles and machine guns. Apparently all this practice paid off because two military companies were formed from members of the Club and they both won high ratings for their excellence in drill and marksmanship.

At the second club meeting on March 28, 1917, all members were sworn in as deputy sheriffs so that they would be prepared to act promptly in case of riots or any other civil disturbance.

After the war, this outfit disbanded as a military unit, but a number of the members decided to keep on under the club name and organization for the purpose of practicing and promoting rifle and revolver shooting.

All shooting was taking place indoors at the Armory. In 1920, Frank Staples leased a large parcel of land in Easton where outdoor shooting could take place. Later that year a decision was made to purchase the property after much debate. Even at that point in time someone had raised the question as to whether or not the township of Easton could obtain an injunction prohibiting the use of the property as a rifle range. Another consideration was that of wandering cows. Over these concerns it was decided to purchase the property - 40 acres located on Sport Hill Road for \$3000. On that same day, April 6, 1921, 13 of the acres were sold for \$1200. \$1800 was paid for the remaining 27 acres with the money raised by notes and the sale of equipment.

During the 1920s many improvements were made to the property. The Club now had facilities for shooting both rifle and revolvers at ranges from 25 to 1000 yards. Two storage houses were built for shooting paraphernalia, telephones were installed for getting prompt reports between the firing points and the targets. Picnic tables and benches had been placed under the trees. Picnic lunches on the property were popular and many members brought their families for an all day outing while the men practiced their shooting or shot matches. Plans were under way for equipping and operating a running deer target as well as a machine rest for testing rifles and ammunition. The first B.R.C. Turkey Shoot on record was held on the Easton property in 1923.

All indoor shooting was done at the Armory in Bridgeport, the range was equipped and maintained by the B.R.C. Later when more room was needed for additional National Guard Units the range was used by them and several Naval Reserve Units. The Central High School also used the range for its practice and home matches. Members of the B.R.C. donated their time to coach the high school boys and the revolver practices of the Bridgeport Police Department. The State of Connecticut aided the Club in regard to the rent, heating, and lighting of the indoor range. Through its membership in the National Rifle Association, Club members were eligible to compete for prizes offered in the many matches conducted by the NRA and other affiliated organizations. Members who joined as individuals were also afforded the privilege of purchasing new and used military equipment at greatly reduced prices.

During 1933 the remaining balance, owed on the Easton land, of \$450 in notes was paid in full. The Club had no debts, owed no bills, owned 27 acres of prime land in Easton, and had \$52.84 in the treasury. ("The good old days.") At this point the Club had 57 members in good standing. Members were still required to shoot government qualification courses for rifle and pistol.

1939 — BRC was actively shooting at the indoor range at the Armory and outdoors at the Easton Range. 55 members shot military qualifications. Many more improvements were made on the Easton property. The road had been widened and built up and all ranges were now protected with backstops. All the brush and trees had been cleaned out between the firing points and the backstops. Many hours were spent cleaning up the ranges to make them safer and more attractive. The Club was rapidly becoming well and favorably known throughout the State with its rifle shooters.

A current problem noted was the lack of participation by pistol shooters. Enough interest could not be obtained to organize a pistol team within the club membership. At the 1939 annual meeting a by-law change was made to allow the wife of any member in good standing to become a member upon payment of \$2. She would have all rights and privileges of the club, but she shall have no voting power; this membership would remain valid only as long as the husband remained a member in good standing. Fred Held, current president of the Club, stated the following in his annual report:

"It has been a successful year, we have made definite advances in the principal objectives of this Club, which are:

- 1. To provide and maintain safe and pleasant ranges on which to carry on small-arms target practice, and***
- 2. The promotion of military rifle and pistol shooting and training in the proper use and handling of firearms, and marksmanship.***

All other activities are simply an extension of these two objects. Therefore, every member of this Club who is physically able to do so should fire over the qualification course each year."

By 1941 membership had increased to 118. Problems have been surfacing over the past few years over the shooting on our Easton range. Neighbors were not happy. Dues were suspended for those in the military service. Shooting at the Armory was being shared by the Marine Corp League, the State Guard, and the Bridgeport Rifle Club. The dinner following the annual meeting was at a cost of \$0.60 each. By December, 1941, the Armory was closed to all civilians.

Discussions began in earnest about building a range and Clubhouse on the Easton Property. The year of 1942 was the first full year of operation under war-time conditions. The loss of the indoor range was a serious blow to the Club's welfare. Efforts were now underway to secure quarters in one of the unused buildings owned by the City of Bridgeport. On January 27, 1943, a lease was offered by the City of Bridgeport for a building off Glenwood Ave, near Beardsley Park. The lease was executed and alterations began on the building which will become known as "The Ice House." By August shooting was active and September was selected as the date for Club members to shoot the qualification course.

During the 1940-1944 years many War Bonds were purchased. Shooting activities were limited due to the rationing on many items including gasoline and ammunition. Throughout the War years, BRC continued its military rifle training program and by 1945 had trained over 260 men in the proper and safe handling of firearms. In 1943, BRC received an award for its training participation. The post war years were difficult for the Club because of the negative reactions to all shooting activities. Peace meant to many no mention of firearms, shooting, violence, etc. Shooting did continue at the Ice House and at the Easton range.

1958 was an important year in Club history since in the fall of 1958 the Bridgeport Junior Rifle Club was founded by Joe Diaz and BRC President Frank Voytek. The first Basic Marksmanship course was held in the icehouse at Beardsley Park.

Friday night was the juniors' night then as it still is today. Seventeen members, composed of sons and daughters of BRC members, were the charter members of the Club. As early as its first year in existence BRC Juniors won a total of 24 matches at the CT Junior Championship Match at Blue Trail. In 1960, Edward Caco was awarded the Distinguished Rifleman Medal by the NRA becoming the first member of the BJRC to win the award. In the 1970s the Junior Club was opened to all interested youngsters, not only children of members. One parent was required to attend the class with their son or daughter.

Many discussions were held in the late 1950s regarding selling the range in Easton and building elsewhere. In 1959, many neighbors in Easton were complaining about the noise on the range. Easton police requested that they be notified when members plan to use the range. The driveway to the range was chained and locked. In an effort to ease tensions a motion was made and seconded to give the Easton police chief an annual free membership in the BRC and permission was given to the Easton auxiliary police to use the Easton range for target practices. (Guess a little bribery attempt never hurts!)

At a special meeting on June 14, 1961 a proposal was made to sell the Easton property due to the tax increases in the town of Easton. The large increase on the Club property would be a large drain on the Club treasury. Members voted in favor of the sale. In February of 1962 a building fund was established with voluntary contributions. A committee was formed to look for other possible building sites.

In December of 1967 the Club was notified by the City of Bridgeport that the property on Glenwood Avenue would need to be vacated. A target date was set for March 1, 1968, meant for the Club to move on a moment's notice. In view of this, plans were also begun again for the building of an indoor range in Easton or in another location. A building committee was formed to check on the feasibility of building a range in Easton or selling the property and building elsewhere. Plans were actually completed for an underground building with an upper club room on the Easton property for \$39,000. A construction company was even selected to obtain a building permit.

In June 1970, an official letter with a 90 day notice was received from the State of Connecticut that the property on Glenwood Avenue must be vacated by September 17, 1979, to make room for highway construction. Plans continued for construction in Easton with debate over underground or above ground. All members would be assessed \$200 in order to finance some of the building costs. Building plans settled upon were for an underground 12 port / 50 foot range with a ranch style club house above it. The completed structure would cost approximately \$32,000.

A Public Hearing was held at Easton Town Hall on November 18, 1970. At this meeting approximately 30 townspeople with their attorney, real estate expert, and traffic expert appealed to oppose the building citing traffic, property devaluation and especially safety. The Board felt that despite the opposition of the townspeople the building as proposed

would be approved. However, it was a pretty safe bet that outdoor shooting would not be allowed again. Shooting had already been suspended prior to the hearing.

December 19, 1970, Easton approved the rifle range bid. Shooting outdoors would not be allowed until the range had been reconstructed to the safety regulations of the NRA for shooting in a populous area. This would involve some major work!

The financial status of the club was evaluated and it would not be possible to obtain a mortgage, therefore, any building in Easton would have to be paid for in full.

In January, 1971, a suit was filed in court against Easton Planning and Zoning by a group of Easton residents opposed to the BRC building. At this point it was decided to definitely sell the Easton property and look in earnest for another town where the Club would be accepted. The money from the land sale would enable the BRC to build elsewhere and pay for the building free and clear. The resolution to sell the Easton land was unanimously approved at the annual meeting on January 10, 1971.

Immediately following the annual meeting, the Board visited several sites in Stratford where the gun climate was good thanks to the Stratford PAL and the Remington Gun Club. Board members were particularly impressed with a site on the corner of Woodend Road and Old South Avenue. The asking price was \$27,000 and the Board voted unanimously to purchase this site. A budget was set at \$100,000 for the new range to be financed by the sale of the Easton land and membership assessments. Jesse James Hamblin was chosen as the architect. The building plans were approved by the Stratford Planning & Zoning.

Annual meeting January 1972 —it has been a busy year — property has been purchased in Stratford and building plans have been approved, however, the Easton property has not yet sold so construction in Stratford cannot be started.

On January 19, 1972, a contract was signed and the Easton property sold for \$115,000.00.

Ground breaking actually happened on June 4, 1972. Under the able leadership of Donald Neuberger as BRC president and Neil Priestley, as building chairman, a dream was realized at last. Bridgeport Rifle Club will have an indoor shooting range of its own. This would not have been possible without the hard work and dedication of the following BRC members who put in so many hours in the planning and execution of this building. They were Frank Dubats, Percy Coker, Al Metzger, John Roman, Jack Killian, Robert Turton, Robert Fulton, Robert Delaney, Lee Longo, Mike Vena, George Rooney, Elmer Anderson, Stan Kristy, and Roy Kuhn.

November 5, 1972. The big day had arrived and over 350 guests attended the grand opening. Guests included U.S. Representative from CT — Stuart McKinney and from the N.R.A. Tom Hodges, Publicity Manager, as the guest speaker representing Major General

Maxwell Rich. State Senator George Gunther, a long time supporter of the shooting sports, fired the first shot at BRC.

As described in the local paper, BRC had a \$100,000 state of the art range with many innovations for its time including the most sophisticated air handling system.

The 1970s and 1980s were very social ones for the Club. Activities were many and varied and included annual Christmas parties, Turkey and Ham Shoots, Jack & Jill Shoots, annual picnics, Champagne Shoots (the champagne was the prize and not consumed at the Club), seminars, and in the 1980s several testimonial dinners.

Leagues were active for pistol, rifle, juniors, and, in the warmer months, big bore shooting. Junior Club coach, Al Metzger, was named Connecticut Coach of the Year in 1982. In 1985 the Club had a membership of 308 with a sizable waiting list. Social activities took a downward spiral during the 1990s probably due to all the adverse gun publicity which exists to this day.

Currently Bridgeport Rifle Club has active pistol, big bore, small bore, and air rifle shooting and leagues. The Junior Club is very active and winning many awards in Connecticut and other states. Many juniors have gone on to colleges with scholarships earned because of their rifle shooting. Juniors and seniors shoot yearly at Camp Perry as they have for many years. Training classes for obtaining pistol permits are conducted on a monthly basis as needed. Turkey and ham shoots continue as family activities as well as the annual meeting and dinner. The membership is currently at 287, consisting of 233 regular members, 52 life members and 2 associate members.

The "Firing Line" is published several times a year to update club members on current happenings and, also, to keep members abreast of any legislative issues. The Bridgeport Rifle Club now also has their own website with all current Club information as well as photos, etc.

The Bridgeport Rifle Club does have an interesting history. As the Club is now in its 90th year, the primary objectives remain as they always were — training in the proper and prudent use and handling of firearms and providing and maintaining safe and pleasant ranges on which to carry on small arms target practice.

The Club is so much more, however, it is a place where many wonderful friendships have been formed and may that continue for the next 90 years. It is also a place where many youngsters have been trained in the disciplines that will help them throughout their entire lives.

Compiled by Joyce Donnelly
April 2007

The following individuals have served as President of Bridgeport Rifle Club

Samuel P. Senior	03/21/1917 – 05/13/1920
Frank T. Staples.....	05/13/1920 – 02/16/1923
A. J. Palmer	02/16/1923 – 01/30/1925
Gordon Z. Smith.....	01/30/1925 – 02/21/1927
George C. Thomas.....	02/21/1927 – 08/10/1927
William J. Mealia	08/10/1927 – 01/15/1929
Earl Naramore	01/15/1929 – 03/07/1930
Andrew Palmer.....	03/07/1930 – 02/17/1932
George Jones	02/17/1932 – 02/11/1938
Fred Held.....	02/11/1938 – 12/16/1940
Durward Castell.....	12/16/1940 – 12/12/1942
Jasper Murphy	12/12/1942 – 12/05/1944
Earl Fowler	12/05/1944 – 12/08/1945
Roland Hitchcock	12/08/1945 –
S. C. Burkhalter	- 12/13/1953
Roland Hitchcock	12/13/1953 – 12/12/1954
Edward Myrup.....	12/12/1954 – 12/16/1955
Frank Voytek.....	12/16/1955 – 12/16/1956
Sidney Colborne	12/16/1956 – 12/20/1959
Elmer Anderson.....	12/20/1959 – 12/13/1964
Howard Linley.....	12/13/1964 – 01/07/1968
Alexander MacEachran	01/07/1968 – 06/17/1968
J. Albert Sundquist	12/15/1968 – 01/18/1970
Rudolf Gerlich.....	01/18/1970 – 09/08/1970
Donald Neuberger	09/08/1970 – 06/10/1973
Robert Fulton.....	06/10/1973 – 06/29/1975
Richard Bartholomew.....	06/29/1975 – 06/11/1977
Robert Turton	06/11/1977 – 06/16/1979
Michael Vena	06/16/1979 – 06/22/1980
George Rooney.....	06/22/1980 – 06/13/1982
John Tomasheski	06/13/1982 – 06/06/1986
Max Mones.....	06/06/1986 – 06/03/1988
Richard Watson	06/03/1988 – 06/03/1994
Storrs Dutko	06/03/1994 – 06/19/2015
John Fritz.....	06/19/2015 – 06/13/2016
Philip B. Barbetta	06/13/2016 –