

The History of the MLA

by Frank Mills

During the late 1930s and early 1940s the two lakes nearest Carleton Place, known as the First and Second lakes had become virtually clogged with weeds. Weed growth had gained momentum and heavy masses of coon tail and other weeds took over large areas of these lakes.

One day in 1943, Mr. Earl Ritchie, a manager at the Bates and Innes Woolen Mill in Carleton Place, and his son-in-law, Pat Iveson, paddled up through the First and Second Lakes to permit Mr. Ritchie to see parts of the lakes he had not looked on for years. They ploughed their way through masses of coon tail, wild rice, pickerel weed and other aquatic vegetation, which grew in masses throughout the centre of these lakes.

It was impossible to take a motor boat up the first and second lakes without wide detours to search for channels through the weeds. The smaller bays were choked with weeds. Mr. Ritchie compared the almost stagnant mass of weed filled water with the clear free flowing lakes he remembered from years before. He was convinced that unless something was done to check the weed growth, the lakes would become worse and worse. More weeds, slower flow of water and more silting would gradually turn our lakes into a series of stagnant ponds.

He consulted the Wild Life authorities in Toronto and Ottawa. The Department of Lands and Forests was asked for advice. Weed poisons, the introduction of carp (to root out weeds) and many other suggestions were considered. All presented difficulties - some, more than others. The one suggestion which seemed suited to meet our problem was simply to cut channels through the weeds. This, in itself, would encourage more boat traffic, which would tend to break up the weed masses and keep the water flowing freely. However, no one knew of any successful method of cutting weeds in such large areas as we had to cut.

Mr. Ritchie wrote to people all over North America. One of his letters put him in touch with a man in Wisconsin who built a pontoon shaped boat with a device like a hay cutter attached to its bow. It was claimed that this pontoon equipped with paddies driven by a small motor could waddle through the weeds, cutting them off at a depth of five feet.

In spite of derision and discouragement, Mr. Ritchie persevered. With the aid of a few friends and supporters, he formed the Mississippi Lakes Association (MLA). The first meeting of the MLA was held in the Carleton Place Council Chamber on October 6th, 1944. A fund raising campaign was started and within a few months

sufficient funds were raised to purchase a Hackney Weed Cutter. After a valiant fight with Canada Customs and some political help, permission was given to import it free of duty at a total cost of about \$800.

In 1945 the weed cutter was launched and watched with curiosity by both its supporters and detractors. It worked and it did its job. Initially channels were cut each year and the lakes opened to the ever increasing host of water craft.



It was never intended to remove all weeds, wild rice and other aquatic vegetation - even if that were possible. Members were conscious that weeds are an essential part of our lake - providing food and shelter for fish, water fowl and wild life. The Mississippi Fish & Game Protective Association was always consulted in planning the cutting because the co-operation of that body was helpful and necessary. The aim of the Lakes Association was to control the weed growth so that parts of the lake would be free of weeds for swimming and boating, while other parts would be left with weed cover to protect and feed its population of wild life.

Once channels had been cut through the weeds it became necessary to mark such passages so that boats could easily find these paths. The MLA assumed the task and this was the beginning of our placing marker buoys in the lake. This role continues today and since weed growth is less of a problem now the buoys only alert boats to under water hazards. The MLA weed cutter became a common site

as it paddled up and down the lakes all summer long keeping the weeds under control. The first boat wore out and a second one was purchased in 1955. Our progress was watched by people from all parts of Canada and many people came to see and appraise its work. Weeds gradually became less of a problem in the 1990s and use of the weed cutter diminished.

The Carleton Place Dam



Although the MLA wasn't directly involved, changes and improvements to the Carleton Place dam, which was built in 1820 by Edmund Morphy, took place continuously until 1970.

The dam was used to provide water for power generation, but this ceased 1962 and in 1970 Ontario Hydro undertook the dam's reconstruction which was completed in 1973. Upon its completion, Hydro turned over the new dam's ownership and operation to the Mississippi Valley Conservation Authority (MVCA). To a very large extent the dam and its operation controls the water level in the lake, which of course is a very prime concern to the MLA. The new dam permits the MVCA to control the water flow out of the lake and since its

installation, on average, lake levels have been higher and more consistent. These higher levels help reduce aquatic vegetation growth, which reduced the need for the weed cutter.

The Transition Years

During the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s the MLA addressed issues that were common to the lakes in this region. Interest and support waxed and waned over this period. Raising funds needed to operate the weed cutter was a perennial challenge, but due to efforts of a few dedicated individuals like Dave Wiloughby, the organization survived. In 1996 Peter Elliott moved permanently to the lake and set about refocusing the MLA. The value of having a strong and supported lake association became increasingly recognized by lake residents as well as non-resident users. By September 1997 Peter had assembled a new Board of Directors with himself as president.



This was the beginning of a new era for the MLA with emphasis on lake stewardship with initiatives to facilitate this thrust. In 1998 the MLA published its first newsletter which later became known as the Mississippi Belle. What started as a modest four page first effort, has now morphed into a full colour, 48 page magazine that is distributed yearly on the Victoria Day weekend. “The Belle”, as it

is now commonly referred to, provides timely information on lake issues and articles that describe life on the lake. It also provides local businesses and organizations a conduit to reach lake residents and users through advertising. It has definitely become a significant part of the MLA's branding.

Records indicate that data for the Canadian Lakes Loon Survey was collected for our lake starting in 1981. This was an initiative by an individual, Charles Jefferson. Loon survey data was provided to the Bird Studies Canada, which conducts the loon monitoring program nationwide, on a sporadic basis until the program was assumed by the MLA in 2005. Since that time the MLA has organized volunteer observers to record loon numbers and breeding success annually for inclusion in the survey. Despite ever increasing human activity on the lake our loon population has remained relatively stable, which some attribute to the abundance of seafood available.

Throughout this period, the MLA continued to deploy marker buoys to warn boaters away from underwater hazards. In 2005 the MLA purchase an 18 foot "stripped down" pontoon boat. Christened the "Miss LA", it was first used in October, 2005 to remove the markers from the lake and still serves us well.

Incorporation

Incorporation was the next big step in the MLA's evolution which offered the elected directors and volunteers protection in a society where litigation has become a possible consequence of the MLA's actions. Making the MLA a legally recognized entity enabled it to deal with governments and agencies which had been difficult until incorporation. Federal incorporation took place in 2002 with Peter Elliott, Guy Charon, Margaret McEwen, Rick Kwissa, Gary Patterson, Ed Carew and Donna Nesbitt as the first Directors.

Website

It became apparent there was a need to communicate more frequently with MLA members and the general public than our annual newsletter permitted so the MLA decided to establish a website. In the summer of 2002 our website, **www.lakemississippi.ca** came on line, set up by Ourtown.ca on Bridge Street with a logo of a steam paddleboat at the top of the main page. In late 2004, David du Feu took over the hosting and redesigned the website into the format you see today. We introduced a sign-in facility where site visitors send us their email address if they wanted to be registered for notification of future updates. On 22 May 2005, we had our 1,000th visitor to the website. We are now at close to 40,000.

Evolution of the MLA

After the turn of the century the MLA began evolving into a more assertive organization. Our membership strategy focussed on attracting Road Associations, which service the private roads around our lake. When a road association joins the MLA, all of its members become members of the MLA. Our membership continues to rise year after year and in 2013 reached the 600 mark. During this time we established a working relationship with the Mississippi Valley Conservation Authority (MVCA). Among other things this includes annual water quality testing and an annual meeting involving our executive and the management of MVCA. This relationship has helped the MLA keep our members concerns and wants visible to MVCA. Lake water levels are always a concern to lake residents and in 2005 we started posting weekly water levels on our website using data supplied by MVCA.

Also in 2005 the MLA joined the Federation of Ontario Cottage Associations (FOCA) permitting ourselves and Road Associations access to insurance that was prohibitively expensive from most other sources. Supporting FOCA through our annual membership contribution lends our weight to FOCA's efforts to lobby the provincial government and its agencies, like MPAC, to deal fairly with lake residents and their property. FOCA is a solid source of information and advice on lake matters. The MLA has established an excellent working relation with FOCA which led to the joint 2009 publication of the "Shore Owner's Guide to Healthy Waterfronts". Tens of thousands of this guide have been distributed throughout the province.

The MLA became politically active during the 2006 municipal elections by arranging all candidates meetings in Beckwith and Drummond North Elmsley townships. As well, we drafted questions for the candidates in both townships. The questions covered lake issues and written responses were solicited and received from the candidates. One result of this initiative was the Beckwith Township private road maintenance support program that started in 2009. Now roughly 20 private roads, most of which serve lake property owners, receive annual grants that help cover road maintenance costs.

To give the MLA a presence on the social media scene, the Mississippi Lakes Association initiated a Facebook page, accessible via our website on February 25th 2012. This facility permits people to post news and photos relating to their lake experiences. Hopefully this communication tool will help keep lake users current what is happening on and around the water.

Looking Ahead

During the past two decades many lake associations throughout Ontario have developed documented plans for their lakes. Originally called Lake Management Plans these documents formalized a consensus among lake residents and lake users as what this group felt their lake should be now and in the future. Now referred to simply as “Lake Plans” they provide reference material for the Official Plans of the municipalities surrounding a lake. Creating a Lake Plan for a lake with the size and diversity of the Mississippi is a daunting task and the MLA procrastinated for several years. Finally with the support of the MVCA, and the Centre for Sustainable Watersheds, we took the plunge in 2013. A separate committee of volunteers, under the chairmanship of Rob Bell, has been formed to tackle this task with a completion target of 2015.

In October 2014, the MLA celebrated its seventieth anniversary which makes us older than most lake users. Over those seventy years the MLA has played an important role in protecting the lake and promoting its stewardship. Hopefully the next seventy will see the MLA continue as a strong and viable voice of the lake. This will require the efforts of people who believe in the goals of the association, but if the past is any indication such people will appear and pick-up the challenge.