

*A History of
SANTA BARBARA
LAWN BOWLS CLUB*

1937 – 2007



By Dudley Miller

In 1937, a group of eleven Scottish-American men founded and were charter members of the Santa Barbara Lawn Bowls Club. They were avid bowlers and extremely devoted to the game--so much so that they failed to devote much time to permanent record keeping. As a consequence, our archives provide a rather incomplete history of the club's early years.

Mr. Roy Cameron, a real estate agent, was the first president of the club and Mr. Hugh Cumming was the first secretary-treasurer. It appears that Mr. Cumming must have also wielded a huge presence at the club during that inaugural year because he took over the presidency for the next six years: 1938-1943. The city directory indicates that Mr. Cumming was a carpenter and a gardener and also in later years worked in building maintenance.

It was apparently Mr. Cameron and Mr. Cumming who approached Parks Superintendent Charles Waugh to request that the City add a bowling green to an existing Community Center – a Center that had been created by the Parks Department at the former site of Santa Barbara High School. A severe earthquake that shook the city in June of 1925 destroyed the high school building. That building, constructed of quarried stone, faced Anapamu Street on the site of what is now our lower green.

One green and a very modest clubhouse were created using WPA funding, and “modest” probably overstates the architectural style of the clubhouse: it was a long, narrow, rather squat wooden structure located in what is now the bench area between our lower and upper greens. It contained a small locker room and equipment storage areas, but no kitchen or clubroom. The appearance of this small, rather drab clubhouse was enhanced by a beautiful bougainvillea adorning its outer walls.

Those initial years reflected a dramatically different era. Individual members hosted meetings and parties at their homes, and when visitors were entertained at the club, coffee was delivered in large urns from the Copper Coffee Pot—a landmark restaurant on State Street near Figueroa. Fine wines were available at a nearby Piggly Wiggly Market for 49-cents per gallon.

A record of the club's presidents is one of the most complete documents in our archives; we have a list naming all 46 of our club's presidents and the dates in which they served (many served more than one year in office). Our most cherished archival piece is a unique plaque on which is mounted small brass plates engraved with the name of each president and the year or years each was in office. This truly classis piece, which now nearly runeth over with names, is on display in our clubroom.

Although the club was created as an all-male organization, four ladies (some wives and/or future wives) very soon put an end to that nonsense and were permitted to bowl starting sometime in 1938.

The ladies elected Anne Adamson as their president and were initially organized separately from the men and bowled separately but paid dues (25-cents per month) to the men's club treasury—the male members paid \$10 per year. This policy of gender discrimination also did not last long. It was apparently only about six months before the ladies were welcomed to bowl with the men, but the exact date at which the club attained complete gender equality is uncertain: Existing meeting minutes record that at the December 1947 annual meeting (10 years after the club was founded) it was moved and approved to “carry our ladies as holding full membership.” Yet it was not until 1989 that a female was elected to the club's presidency when Betty Miller, a petite ball of fire who ran a small store on the Breakwater, took over the helm. Betty now lives in Las Vegas.

The club's membership slowly increased over the years—by 1949 it had 42 members and was rapidly increasing. By 1956 there was a clear need for a larger and more elegant clubhouse; enter Mr. Spencer Adams. Mr. Adams was a Chicago attorney who had come to Santa Barbara when he retired, bought a home on the Riviera, joined the club and became a devoted bowler. He offered to finance the construction of a new clubhouse with the condition imposed on the City of Santa Barbara that this land be “officially dedicated to park and recreational purposes” and “shall be designated and known as Spencer Adams Park.” This was made official on April 26, 1956 by City Ordinance No. 2534. The parcels so named include a rectangle defined by a line starting at the south corner of said parcels extending 225 feet along Anapamu Street and 300 feet along De La Vina Street. We might note in passing that the temporary parking lot adjacent to our greens is entirely within the boundaries of Spencer Adams Park. The new clubhouse was built at a cost of approximately \$16,000, donated entirely by Mr. Adams. It was an extremely generous contribution; in 1956 that amount of money could buy a small home in Santa Barbara.

The club entered into a contract with the City of Santa Barbara under which the club dues and other incomes pay for greens' maintenance and incidental expenses associated with the Club's activities, while the City provides landlord services for the property and its basic landscaping. Over the years—especially over the most recent years—club members have also donated a huge amount of time, labor and funding to enhance the peripheral landscaping.

The club soon began to prosper as more and more Santa Barbarans were introduced to the game of bowls. Nearly all of the members in those early years had come from the British Isles.

Playing in teams of three bowlers on each competing side, a single green accommodates only 48 bowlers per game. As the Club's membership approached and passed 100 in the late 1950s, there was a crying need for a second green—and for the \$10,000 needed to build one. Parks Superintendent Finlay MacKenzie favored building the new green but the City was apparently struggling with its budget and would not approve the needed funding. Again enter Mr. Spencer Adams (now 90 years of age) who offered to donate \$5,000 toward the cost of a new green if the City would match that amount. Again, the City balked.

Apparently for the first time, the Club became aware of the existence of the Joslyn Fund, a fund created by Marcellus Joslyn, another Chicago attorney, who had retired to Santa Monica and donated several million dollars to senior community centers and lawn bowls clubs in Southern California. The archives are not entirely clear, but it appears that the Joslyn Fund provided the matching \$5,000 although there are reports indicating that other members may have also contributed to the funding. The second green was completed in 1960.

We do not know if it was a case of build-it-and-they-will-come, but the club's membership soared in the 1960s. It soared to such an extent that the City needed an additional bowling club: The MacKenzie Park Lawn Bowls Club was opened on January 6, 1966. The MacKenzie Park greens were also partially financed by the Joslyn Fund.

A total of 91 members from the SBLBC became charter members of the MPLBC, and a major fraction of the members remaining on our roster were members of both clubs. Today about 10 percent of our members choose to maintain dual memberships. In the glory days of Santa Barbara lawn bowling (the 1960s and 70s), both the SBLBC and the MacKenzie Park clubs reached membership roles numbering about 200 members, each.

Our membership then ebbed for several years but peaked again at around 180 members in the early 1990s—it has slowly declined since then to its present level of about 112 regular members plus 15 associate members (associates are non-bowlers who enjoy our social events). Hopefully, we can look forward to another peak, but the mystery of membership fluctuations remains an enigma crying for a solution. Many promotional tactics have been tried, but drive-bys and word-of-mouth between neighbors and friends still seem to be the most productive sources of new members.

In April of 1966 our clubhouse was extended to provide more much-needed space. About 15 feet were added to the south end of the building to extend the locker room and to add the equipment storage room. Again, the City had balked at the cost and timing of the proposed addition. Since the Club was scheduled to host a large

group of visitors from Canada later that year, the members wanted extra clubhouse space added sooner rather than later. In a fine demonstration of club spirit, members donated the entire \$3,200 needed for the addition.

A final project was completed in June of 1985 when a wooden shed adjacent to the clubhouse was extended to its present configuration (contiguous with the south end of the clubhouse.) The extension of the wooden structure provided an additional storage room for a tractor and also a convenient storage space for the many umbrellas frequently used to provide welcomed shade for our bowlers during summer bowling—which means nearly all year in this Paradise on the Pacific.

Other noteworthy capital improvement projects financed with club funds and completed by the labor of our members were the construction of the trellis on our lanai in 1992 and replacing the wood in all of our “bus stop” benches (22 of them) with pau-lope in 2002. Pau-lope is an extremely hard wood (a nail cannot be driven into it) and was rather pricey (\$3,708 worth), but it should be as good as new when the club celebrates its 100th Anniversary. We certainly hope so. Redoing the benches with pau-lope was another of the vast array of projects guided and nurtured to completion by Life Member Gino Mangini. Gino has calluses on his calluses but, unfortunately, he is now retired from lawn bowling because of failing health.

Since the club operates on an annual budget (this year that budget is \$24,000) financed entirely by annual dues (now at \$200), maximizing membership equates to minimizing dues. There are, of course, also advantages inherent in a small membership—it is easier to manage a smaller club, no crowding, no parking problems and a more intimate atmosphere. It seems that 140 to 150 members is about an optimum number for our club.

Although annual dues cover the club’s operating expenses, other resources, namely donations, must cover capital investments in equipment, facilities and other club improvements. The Joslyn Fund, mentioned above, was one such resource and donations by many members and past members have been and continue to be another generous source of funds. Many members add a little extra when they pay their annual dues. The Joslyn Foundation was liquidated a few years ago and its residual largess divided among all the lawn bowling clubs in Southern California. We received a final \$2,500 check. *In toto* the club received about \$60,000 from the Joslyn Foundation over several years.

We also make a modest income by encouraging our members to collect and bring in aluminum cans to recycle and our 25-cent between-games coffee/tea/cookie charge is profitable because we do not have to purchase many cookies—our ladies donate a generous supply of delicious baked goodies. Long-time treasurer Russ Morgan is a no-nonsense watchdog of our treasury and we can rest assured our general fund is wisely invested and rigorously scrutinized.

The Heritage Club, a brainchild of Life Member Carol M. Smith, was established in 1995 to honor those who have expressed their devotion and appreciation to the club through sizable donations—both cash donations and by naming the club as a beneficiary in their wills. The Heritage Club maintains a Donors’ Tree on which the names of these thoughtful members are engraved. Tax-deductible donations are made to the Parks and Recreation Department’s ARC Fund, earmarked for the SBLBC.

Members and former members whose names now appear on the Donors’ Tree are:

Lynn Abbott
Thelma Bresnan
Kee Cubert
Mina Launt
Charles Fleck
Stan Palmer
Van Wingerden Family
Paul McCahen

By Far the biggest project the club has completed since the construction of the Spencer Adams clubhouse in 1956 has been the installation of an artificial surface on our lower green. Over the years, our lower green (the club’s first green) was beset with problems—mostly recurring bare spots and moss growth—blamed on the proximity of the beautiful Morton Bay Fig tree located at the south end of that green. There was much debate regarding the actual cause of this green-maintenance dilemma but there was a clear need for drastic action, either to completely replace the sod and its substructure with a different more hardy grass and add a drain field or to install an artificial surface: enter Mr. Stan Palmer.

Mr. Palmer, a long-time member who is extremely devoted to lawn bowling, offered to donate \$50,000 toward an estimated \$100,000 needed for a new green if the City or some other entity would come forth with matching funds. The costs of a new grass surface or an artificial surface were essentially identical. Through a welcomed coincidence, it was at this time the City offered to compensate our club to the tune of \$33,000 for the temporary use of several spaces in our parking lot for city-employee parking during construction of the city’s

Granada Building parking structure. The remainder of the necessary financing was available in our general fund and in the money accumulated in the Joslyn Fund, so a new green seemed attainable.

The big decision was the choice between grass and carpet as the bowling surface. By an overwhelming majority in a vote held on July 16, 2002, the members opted for installation of an artificial surface.

President Bill Schultz labored heroically through the city bureaucracy to obtain all of the necessary fund transfers, permits and approvals—and also negotiated a materials and labor contract with the winning green's contractor, AJ & EA Berry Pty Ltd of Glen Waverly, Victoria, Australia.

An enormous amount of physical labor was also provided by the dedicated volunteer work primarily performed by members Ray Togni (now deceased), Gino Mangini and George Glerum, who installed a root barrier between the huge Moreton Bay Fig tree and the new green, connected the green's drainage system, replaced several backboards, and installed needed hardware items. Many other members also contributed to the prodigious effort needed to realize the dream of a new green.

After 21 months of meetings, planning, permits, command performances, fund raising, negotiating, debating and hard work by a bunch of good people, we celebrated a rain-delayed Valentine's Day and the opening of the new green of February 20, 2003. The total cost (contractor and associated expenses) was \$112,100.

The official dedication of the green was held on May 1, 2003, with 80 members and guests in attendance. President Bill Schultz presided at the festivities and introduced several city officials who were instrumental in helping to unravel the bureaucratic intricacies always faced in projects of this nature: Parks Director Richard Johns, Assistant Director Jeff Cope, Supervisor Jason Bryan and Supervisor Santos Escobar.

City Councilman Rusty Fairly addressed the assembly and read a proclamation naming the Stan Palmer Green. This proclamation was presented to Stan and his wife, Wanda, along with a bronze plaque that is now displayed on an out wall of the clubhouse adjacent to the Stan Palmer Green, in perpetuity.

A collage of two photos, one showing an overview of the dedication ceremony and one taken of Stan and Wanda on the new green that day, now adorns a wall in our clubhouse. A copy of that collage is also proudly displayed on a wall near the back-room bar at Harry's Plaza Restaurant—along with Harry's vast collection of photos showing the history of Santa Barbara. Harry's has long been a favorite watering hole for thirsty and hungry Santa Barbarians.

The club's monthly newsletter *On The Jack* was first published in May of 1978 with Dorothy Jefferson as the first editor. Editor Jefferson included a bit of philosophy at the bottom of Volume I, No.1 of that newsletter: "Old bowlers never die...they just get better greens and much less bias." Including such bits of wisdom became a tradition used by all of the many editors to follow.

Club Secretary Eileen Morton is now the editor of *On The Jack*. Eileen took on that job in January of 2004.

In this brief history of the club, we have described big projects and landmark improvements in the club as a method of summarizing the club's history. Those accomplishments are sources of pride but the real value and heart of the club lie in our weekly, monthly and yearly personal interactions with other members and with other lawn bowling clubs.

Probably the biggest splash our club has made on the national scene of the lawn bowling community was in October of 1979 when we co-hosted, with MacKenzie Park, the National Championships—attracting the best bowlers from all over the United States.

Our yearly activities calendar, always included as a part of the club's annual directory of members, shows a schedule of local and regional tournaments and visits by and our visits to other clubs in this area. These events and the many fun parties and sumptuous catered barbecues—in addition to the pleasures of our four-days-per-week open bowling—are what really matter in the big picture.