

A Brief History of the Heather Curling Club

I am sure that somewhere in the United States there is a town smaller than ours that has a four sheet curling rink, but I doubt that there are many. Our community of 1,700 is fortunate to have a curling rink. Curling is sometimes called the "Grand Old Game", and this grand game is thought to be about five hundred years old although historians still debate whether it began in Scotland or Europe. With Mapleton's Scottish roots it's not surprising that most of our club members probably favor the idea of a Scottish origin to curling.

Curling is a unique team sport that combines strategy, skill, as well as a wonderful social component. People sometimes wonder whether curlers are athletes. With curling, you get out what you put in. If you want a work out, you can get one. Granted, the skip may not get as physically taxed as the rest of the team, but one study claimed that sweepers will get a calorie burn similar to a two or three mile jog. You often hear the term "chess on ice" with regard to curling. Do you want the point or should you throw it through and keep the hammer? Sometimes the game seems so much clearer on television or behind the glass. It is not always so easy to know what to do in the heat of the moment, but the mental part of the game can be quite a challenge too.

The social aspect of the game is unique as well. I honestly believe the nicest people I have ever met have been curlers. You begin each game by shaking your opponent's hand and saying "Good Curling" and win or lose; you end the game the same way. Following the game, opposing teams sit together and have a soda or cocktail and talk about shots made and missed. I suspect that many relationships, friendships, and probably a few business deals had their start at the local curling club.

On the outskirts of Mapleton, there is a Minnesota State Highway marker which recognizes the importance of curling to Mapleton and refers to this area as the "Cradle of Curling". This refers to early Scottish immigrants who came to this area in 1856-1857 and began to farm and build a community. They also brought with them their love of Scotland, Robert Burns, and curling. Everyone wants to be first, and I suppose our club is no different. It is almost impossible to say exactly when curling began in this area. For years, the local newspaper would say that we had the oldest club by "direct" or "lineal" descent which I think means that we have current members that can trace their lineage back to those early Scottish settlers. We will probably never know exactly when curling began in this area. However, to think of the possibility of an early Scotch settler sliding a stone down the Maple River in 1857 - a year before Minnesota became a state is stunning !

Where there were Scots and ice, there was curling. In this area, they curled on Lura Lake, Rice Lake, Bass Lake, Maple River, and probably some other areas as well. We sometimes have trouble making it to our league games on time, but nineteenth century curling in this area was hard work. To find good ice, shovel and clear it, mark hog lines or circles, and then curl for three or four hours - this was an all-day affair. The conditions were rough; the games were long, and the scores awfully high by our standards. A 1891 newspaper account described the ideal conditions for curling as a A...clear cold day with the thermometer at about 15 degrees below zero, no wind and the ice as smooth as a mirror...@. These were the conditions that curlers hoped for but Aseldom obtained@. We complain about a bump on the ice or a hill on sheet four, but we have it quite good compared to those early curlers.

Early curling equipment was pretty crude as well. They would have to scratch circles and center tee's. On occasion, a dye might be used to denote a particular part of the circle. Brooms could be saplings with twigs attached to the end and later perhaps a wide corn broom that you would purchase from the general store. Stones often called Astanes@ were even trickier. It is pure speculation, but it is certainly possible that they used river rocks or field stones to start. However, eventually they fashioned circular wooden blocks or stones that they would use. Legend has it, that in this area some men made off with their wives flat irons and used those to curl with. It really wasn't until the late nineteenth century that this area saw the first granite curling stones imported from Scotland and even then they were something of a novelty.

Curling and celebrating the birth of the Scottish poet, Robert Burns, have always been closely associated. This group met at various farm homes but was more formally organized as the Blue Earth Valley Burns Club in 1866 and met at the home of Joseph Dobie, Sr.. In 1888, there were some disagreements and the organization was renamed the Maple River Curling Club. As the popularity of the game as well as the size of the gatherings increased, there was a desire to move the celebration into Mapleton. In 1894, this became a reality with the Opera House hosting a Burns celebration with three key elements, supper, curling, and a literary program. It is unclear where the curling took place, but we assume that they curled on ice somewhere in town.

In 1896, a better outdoor rink was created in Mapleton where the library park is located. We do have a postcard of this which illustrates the wooden Astanes@, large corn brooms, hacks, and heavy fur coats that the curlers wore. To be able to draw water from the town=s water reservoir or tower and create better ice was an improvement, but as time passed local curlers wanted an indoor facility.

In 1904-1905, a group met for the purpose of building an enclosed curling rink, and the organization became incorporated as the Heather Curling Club (the group coordinating the Burns celebration became known as the Maple River Burns Club). This building was built east of where Mapleton=s elevator is, and it was a two sheet facility with a viewing/ warming area. By our standards this was pretty primitive, this was natural ice, but they did have

access to water. By this time, curling was becoming more organized. They had a new name, by-laws, minutes, and 11 teams enjoying the new indoor curling rink.

From time to time, the local newspaper would note the unusual vernacular used in curling like *Asoooping up* which meant sweeping or *Apat lid* which mean putting a stone on the tee or *Ajust crack an egg* - which to be honest, I'm not really sure what that one means. In any event, locals as well as visitors seemed to enjoy watching the unique game.

This enclosed facility served the curlers well for over four decades, but a new curling rink - the one we presently occupy was built in 1950. They were looking for land that was available along with water and sewer in the city limits. This was financed by donations and shares which were sold and much of the work was volunteer labor by curlers. In 1954-55, the club went from natural ice to artificial ice. The 1950's also saw the purchase of matched rocks. In 1968, space concerns were addressed and a kitchen and spiel room was added to the building.

As board and club members, we have always been challenged to find a secondary use for a large building which essentially gets used four months out of the year. In the 1950s, this was addressed nicely when Carl's Roller Rink came in and set up a wood floor (where the ice would be in the winter). This was the place to be for area kids and still holds fond memories for many. The roller rink operated primarily in the 1950s and into the early 1960s.

In the early 1980s, rubber mats were purchased to make the ice more uniform. Over the past several years, the kitchen area has been remodeled and improved, walls painted, display case built, and ice equipment purchased. In the 1990's, a Mighty Ducks grant from the State of Minnesota allowed the club to address larger projects like a new ice plant, steel roof, and interior ceiling. Recently, new flooring was put in the dining area, carpeting replaced in the viewing area, and new seats put in the viewing area. Mapleton was thrust into the national spotlight with a feature on the Heather Curling Club in the February, 1999 edition of the *ASmithsonian*. The author, Bruce Watson, said that he wanted to come to a place that captured the *Aspirit of curling*; we are a bit biased of course but we would like to think that he came to the right place.

Our club has Men's League on Monday and Wednesday nights and a Women's League on Tuesday nights, and there is normally open curling on Thursday nights. The club hosts a variety of spiels Men's, Women's, Mixed, Teen, Family, sometimes others, and Mike and Jill Swehla's Bass Lake spiel has been great fun the past few years. Our junior program under the direction of Larry Barott has been a source of pride over the years, and we have had a number of successful competitive curlers. We have also had club members who have gone on the Scottish curling tour, and our club enjoys hosting the Scottish men and women when they pass through the Heather Curling Club. Even if you don't play, the curling club is a great gathering place to talk to friends, watch curling, or have a burger.

In 2000, I was fortunate to travel with some fellow club members to The Country Club in Brookline, Massachusetts, and we met a man named David Will. We didn't know him, but he knew Jack Will from being on the Scottish tour with him. When he saw us, he smiled and said that he always liked to see the guys from Mapleton because they reminded him of his friend AJoch (Jack Will) and the boys from Mapleton who yell hurry, hurry,hard. One of the great Scottish quotes that you see from time to time sprinkled across curling rinks is AWe're all brithers a. Curling is indeed a unique and fun game, and in Mapleton we are fortunate that those early Scottish settlers left us with such a wonderful legacy, the Heather Curling Club.

AWe're all brithers a

Tim Solie