

The First Golden Age of Tennis in Canada The Niagara-on-the-Lake Years: 1884 - 1925

If you want to see the world's greatest tennis in Canada today, you'll head for the Rogers Cup events at York University in Toronto and at Jarry Park in Montreal. If you had wanted to see the best tennis 125 years ago, you would have headed to Niagara-on-the-Lake. You would have been part of a large throng of spectators, most travelling by ship and by rail, and you would have been filled with eager anticipation.

Tournament headquarters was the Queen's Royal Hotel, one of the largest and most glamorous resort destinations in North America. It overlooked Lake Ontario and the mouth of the Niagara River and was serviced by the steamship *Cayuga* which docked about where the present Sailing Club is located. There was intense hustle and bustle as each ship was unloaded, with players arriving from major centers throughout the northeast and as far away as California. This was a major happening!

The beginnings of tennis as we know it today came toward the end of the 19th century. The All-England Club at Wimbledon established itself immediately as the heart centre of the new game, with The Championships played for the first time in 1877.

These early years prior to the 1st World War are sometimes thought of as the "garden party" period of tennis, no doubt brought about because of the many familiar images of lawn tennis courts in leafy settings, populated by players dressed according to Victorian norms - long white flannels for the gents, dresses to the ankles for the ladies.

But make no mistake regarding the intensity of the competition. This was a rigorous sport from the get-go, with abundant interest in the science and technical aspects of the game. How-to books abounded.

All the elements we treasure today about tennis were there from the start:

- healthy vigorous outdoor activity in lovely settings;
- interest for spectators as well as for competitors;
- enjoyable for all ages;
- strong social environment;
- both men and women playing on the greatest stages at the same time on the same terms.

Tournament competition was also there from the start, with the All-England Club leading the way. The US Open was begun at Newport in 1881, and the Monte Carlo Championships established the Riviera as a tennis hotspot beginning in 1897.

How could Canada fit into this picture? In order to be home to an international tournament and achieve a quality stature, several elements were required:

- the location had to be considered a desirable destination both by players and by spectators;
- it had to have top-notch facilities for tennis, accommodations and social events;
- it had to be readily accessible by the dominant transportation systems of the day;
- it had to have related attractions and entertainments, so as to amplify the total experience.

In 1880, there was one location in Canada that filled all these requirements: Niagara-on-the-Lake. The majestic Queen's Royal Hotel had been built in 1869. It was dignified and elegant, yet warm and inviting. Everyone loved it! Six beautiful grass courts could be viewed from the broad balconies, and afforded space for hundreds of spectators all around them.

Niagara-on-the-Lake was at the crossroads of all the major population centres of the northeast. It was served by four steamships daily, and three trains met the boats.

By virtue of the annual encampment of 10,000 soldiers, and the attendant officers and officers' wives, it was a hub of social activity. Parties and balls, along with a wide variety of musical entertainments, were a specialty. In addition, the natural delights of the river and lake, of the picturesque golf course and bowling greens, were much-enjoyed attractions. It was ideal!

A tournament was established in 1886, for the week following the US Open at Newport. Dubbed "The International at Niagara-on-the-Lake", it was considered the final stop on the summer circuit and quickly became a must-do on the calendar of major players of the day. Over the next 20 years, all the US Open and Canadian Open champions and a number of Wimbledon Champions would play The International.

The Canadian Lawn Tennis Association, forerunner to Tennis Canada, was founded in 1890. One of its first goals was to pick up the Canadian Open, founded in 1881 by the Toronto Lawn Tennis Club, and make it into a more high-profile event. A number of variations were tried, but nothing could match the success of 'The International at Niagara-on-the-Lake'.

So, the CLTA approached the Niagara Tennis Club and Queen's Royal Hotel with a bold and courageous idea: could Niagara-on-the-Lake handle **two** major international events each summer - The International at the end of August, and the Canadian Open in mid-July? The answer was affirmative, and the first really-big-show Canadian Open took place in Niagara-on-the-Lake in July, 1895.

It continued there for many years - achieving a level of prestige and success that would not have been possible in other locations. This was enough to establish Canada, and the Canadian Open, as a significant player on the world tennis stage - worthy of being at the table when future plans were drawn.

Friendships were made, connections established and bonds forged, that would endure through all the challenges to come in future years. Niagara-on-the-Lake gave Canadian tennis an opportunity to be expansive, to be celebratory, to be joyful and happy and proud.

Change came with World War I and the postwar period. The Queen's Royal Hotel closed and was slowly dismantled, ending a 30-year run for international tennis in Niagara-on-the-Lake.



Club Member **Tady Saczkowski**, pictured here with Club Director and history compiler **Rosemary Goodwin**, has done extensive research into this period and has the world's largest collection of photos and records on tennis at the Queen's Royal. The work is in the process of being collated. We hope to make it available later this summer.