ANSWERING QUESTIONS ABOUT THE EARLY HISTORY OF TENNIS IN ONTARIO.

Capt. R. Innes-Taylor in his Ottawa Citizen Mar 28, 1924 article entitled The Story of Lawn Tennis said, ‘No attempt has ever been made to write a history of lawn tennis in Canada and in attempting to do so one is faced with rather incomplete records of the early days, as it is only within recent years that the CLTA has kept any authentic records.’

The more you read about early tennis history the more you realize that it is impossible to find more than a few clues as to how, where, and through whom tennis evolved. You also realize that it is likely that the information you find might have come about when people have filled in the gaps with their theory as to what might have been the case.

For instance, one source will say that Mary Ewing Outerbridge brought the first tennis equipment to the USA in 1874 from Bermuda. Another will say that in fact she couldn’t have obtained the equipment in Bermuda that year as it wasn’t available until 1875. Because Outerbridge played a significant role in getting people, and in particular women, playing tennis in the US in Staten Island, she deserves the credit even if she wasn’t the first. The story that customs confiscated her tennis equipment and that her brother had to intervene to get it back is likely exaggeration - but it does make a far more engaging and memorable story because all stories need characters and conflict.

Add to this that the OLTA and the CLTA were volunteer run and had no fixed office space until the 1970s, it’s amazing that we have any records at all with which to try to piece together the first fifty years of the association and the lead up to its creation.

Martin Kendrick produced the book Advantage Canada for the centenary of Tennis Canada in 1990 and although I have used this volume as a starting point for my research, I have found inconsistencies with other sources.

WAS ISIDORE F. HELLMUTH REALLY THE FIRST PERSON TO BRING TENNIS EQUIPMENT TO CANADA?

Isidore F. Hellmuth was very important in the early days of lawn tennis in Canada. He was studying in England and returning to Canada on an annual basis when standard equipment was first made easily available due to the efforts of Major Walter Clopton Wingfield. He could have brought one of the first Sphairistike box sets and quickly set up courts on the grounds at Huron College, London, where his father was Dean. Isidore was a tireless promoter of tennis and an enthusiastic competitor. He is reputed to have played for a London team who called themselves the “Holy Rollers” (Huron was a theological college) and to have played the first tennis match in Canada between the Holy Rollers and Kingston.

We believe Hellmuth was instrumental in forming the Toronto Lawn Tennis Club somewhere around 1876 and that he helped organize and won the first Canadian championships at the Toronto Lawn Tennis Club on the grounds of the Palace Hotel on Front Street. The Marylebone Cricket Club had developed and approved rules for lawn tennis in 1875 and these were adopted by the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club for the first playing of the Lawn Tennis Championships at Wimbledon in 1877. Since Hellmuth decided to use these MCC rules for his first Canadian Championships, they were immediately recognized internationally when they were played in 1881.

HAS TENNIS COMPETITION ALWAYS BEEN AVAILABLE FOR WOMEN ONTARIO?

In 1882, a mixed doubles event was part of the Canadian Championships and in 1883, both women’s singles and mixed doubles were included. Interestingly the women’s singles final was a five set match in which Miss Sykes of Toronto beat Miss Bradshaw of Great Britain 6-3, 6-8, 3-6, 6-4 (source Advantage Canada). The earliest tournament draw that Capt. R Innes-Taylor could find records of, was held at the Victoria T.C. in Toronto in 1891. Miss Maude D. Osborne (who would go on to win three Canadian Championships) won the women’s singles beating Mrs. Sydney Smith of Ottawa 4-6, 3-6, 6-4, 6-3, 6-1.

No women’s events were recorded for the Canadian Open between 1883 and 1892, when Maude Delano Osborne of Sutton, Ontario became the official first women’s singles winner of a Canadian Open. Later, in 1895, with Mrs. Sydney Smith of Ottawa, they became the first Canadian women to compete outside of Canada in any organized sport. It seems that women played the same number of sets as men in the early days of Canadian tennis.

WHY WERE THE CANADIAN CHAMPIONSHIPS HELD IN NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE STARTING IN 1895?

Niagara-on-the-Lake was an attractive destination, a resort close to one of the seven natural wonders of the world, Niagara Falls. It was well positioned for international travel, with railways nearby.
and regular steamboat service to Buffalo and Toronto. Niagara-on-the-Lake held a tournament, the Niagara International, which was on the International Tennis Tour and played shortly after the U.S. Championships.

H.G. MacKenzie, President of Tennis Canada between 1883 and 1900, had won the Niagara International men’s singles in 1883, its inaugural year. In 1894, the CLTA responding to complaints about the Toronto Lawn dominating the event, moved the Canadian Championships to Ottawa, however participation was poor. In 1895 the CLTA, presumably at the suggestion of the President, decided to combine the Canadian Championships with the existing Niagara event and piggy-back on the international attendance.

Niagara-on-the-Lake organizers welcomed the opportunity to expand their event with a National Championship label. The move was a huge success. The town created a carnival atmosphere in the town, with extensive social events and entertainments held alongside the championship matches. The Queen’s Royal Hotel was the centre of activity as it housed the players and its adjoining courts were used for matches. This resulted in a lot of American and International players being attracted to play there, which in turn stimulated spectator attendance. Fourteen Canadian Open Championships were held in Niagara-on-the-Lake between 1895 and 1914.

WHAT WAS THE IMPACT OF WW1?
All national and international tennis competitions were suspended during the world wars. A.C. McMaster was President of the CLTA between 1904 and 1916. There is no mention of him or where he came from in Advantage Canada and in 1917 the position of President of the CLTA was vacant. With no competitive tennis being played the CLTA would have had little purpose. McMaster would probably have been responsible for making sure records were maintained and the association continued to exist. Maybe he gave up, maybe he couldn’t continue, but he would likely have had no way of organizing an AGM or recruiting a successor, so probably the CLTA just ceased to function.

WHY WAS THE OLTA FOUNDED IN BARRIE IN 1918?
While Ontario communities had traditionally taken responsibility for running the Canadian Opens, the CLTA was emphasizing promoting tennis across Canada and in particular on the West coast. When, in 1913, Canada fielded its first Davis Cup team, all four members of the team were members of the Victoria (British Columbia) Tennis Club. Similarly, the 1914 team was composed of members of the Winnipeg Lawn Tennis Club. My guess is that Ontario being left out of international competition didn’t sit well with some and that during WW1 the CLTA ceased to function. So as soon as WW1 was over the group of tennis enthusiasts from Ontario got together and I surmise that their goal was to revive and assert influence over the CLTA as well as to form a provincial tennis association, the OLTA, to protect Ontario players’ interests.

The names we have of attendees at the meeting where the Ontario Lawn Tennis Association was formed are Jack Boys, Jack Little, Bill Little and Garnett Meldrum, we presume that Col. Blackstock also attended.

Jack Boys was William Alves Boys K.C., a lawyer and later a member of parliament for Barrie and Simcoe County area. According to the profile of him published in The Northern Advance, he won the Quebec tennis championships in 1900 and had been an all-Canadian tennis champion. He had a home near Barrie with a private tennis court, which is probably where the meeting took place.

W.A. Boys K.C. became President of the CLTA in 1918 and Garnett Meldrum succeeded him in 1922 and remained President of the CLTA until 1933.

Jack Little and Bill Little were also well known in the Barrie area as top ranked players. Bill Little was probably Dr. William Caruthers Little, he served in the war and later was a doctor and coroner in the Barrie area. An oral history of Dr. Bill as he was known, notes that he played tennis with Jack Boys. Dr. Bill had a brother John Caruthers Little who was likely the Jack Little, who served on and off as President of the OLTA between 1920 and 1952.

Colonel George Gooderham Blackstock was from Toronto, he had served in the war in Europe and was an entrepreneur and all-round athlete. He was probably chosen as a figurehead President of the OLTA for its first year because of his charisma and his military experience. This would stall any criticism of efforts to regenerate interest in tennis so soon after the war.

In 1919 the Canadian Championships returned to the Toronto Lawn.

WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE AND DURING WW2?
Competitive tennis was suspended during the second world war. Our records indicate that there were 4 Presidents between 1920 and 1948 one of whom was Jack Little, who was at the meeting in Barrie and also was President from 1948 to 1952. The others were Mel Brock, Ed Condon and Walter Burns.

Mel Brock was probably George Melville/Melbourne Brock. An all-round athlete and member of the U of T Varsity Blue Hall of Fame, he represented Canada in athletics in the 1912 Stockholm Olympics taking 4th place in the half mile. He lived in St. Catharines.

Eddie Condon was a keen tennis player, winning at least nine Ottawa championships. He was also a tireless promoter of the sport and, in particular, Junior Tennis. Starting in the 1950s, he was heavily involved with the CLTA as the Chairman of the CLTA Development Committee for 15 years and as Executive Secretary and Executive Director of the CLTA. He published the first CLTA Yearbook in 1972 with updates in 73 and 74. Eddie represented Canada as a skier in the 1932 Olympics and was a strong track and field competitor. He was inducted into the Ottawa Sports Hall of Fame in 1967 and to the Tennis Canada Hall of Fame in 1993 as a Builder. We can find no information on Walter Burns.

What is clear is that after Ww2, Jack Little, one of the founders of the OLTA in 1918, took on the Presidency of the OLTA and likely was responsible for reviving its operation. We do not know anything about J. Stafford or H. Beck, who succeeded Jack Little as Presidents between 1953 and 1956.
WAS THE OLTA THE FIRST PROVINCIAL TENNIS ASSOCIATION?

When tennis equipment started to be available in the mid 1870’s communities across Canada were quick to form tennis clubs. (see diagram The Spread of Tennis in Canada). In fact, by the time the CLTA was founded in 1890, clubs existed in all provinces except for Saskatchewan. By 1890 there were at least 11 tennis clubs in Ontario because their representatives were at the July 1st meeting in Toronto where the Canadian Lawn Tennis Association was established. The Toronto Lawn (1876) and the Ottawa Tennis Club (now OTLBC, founded 1881) and the Granite Club (founded 1875 added tennis 1880) were represented, along with clubs which did not survive such as the Victoria and Osgoode Hall clubs (likely associated with University of Toronto), Peterborough, Petrolia, London, Park, Rosedale and St. Catharines. Isidore Helmutt’s brother in law, Charles Hyman, was the first President of the CLTA and he won the 1884 and 1886 through 1889 Canadian Championship men’s singles event.

According to Advantage Canada, the Manitoba Tennis Association was founded in 1880 but I suspect that really was 1890. The two clubs involved were Winnipeg Lawn Tennis Club, (which wasn’t founded until 1881) and the Winnipeg Canoe Club, (which wasn’t founded until 1883). The same source cites the Quebec Tennis Federation as being founded in 1899 and the Saskatchewan Tennis Association as being created in 1912. A Canadian, Bobby Powell, founded the Pacific North West Tennis Association in 1902 which covered British Columbia and some American communities. It seems Ontario was one of the last provinces to have a tennis association.

The first Boards of the CLTA had provincial representation with additional members being people associated with the running of the Canadian Championships from Ontario. While Ontario players had effective control of the CLTA they probably saw no need for an additional association for Ontario.

IS IT TRUE THAT LORNE MAIN WAS ONCE PRESIDENT OF THE OLTA?

Lorne Main was President of the OLTA between 1956 and 1958. Lorne had won the Monte Carlo tournament men’s singles events in 1954. He was 26 years old in 1956 and had just switched from being a playing member to a non-playing captain of the Davis Cup team. When asked about what he did as President, Lorne told me that they just used his name as a figurehead and maybe that is why we don’t know much about the OTA Presidents for those first forty years.

WHY DOES ONTARIO HAVE MORE TENNIS CLUBS PER CAPITA THAN OTHER PROVINCES?

We know that there were many tennis clubs formed in Ontario in the early days of tennis as Ontario was heavily represented when the CLTA was formed. It’s probably fair to say that the members of these clubs were the local elite. The Winnipeg Lawn Tennis Club made a fascinating video about their club and I think the early days of this club would fairly represent these clubs. (tennismanitoba.com/wltc-history-documentary/)

As the popularity of tennis increased, the demand for courts increased. In the early days a club might only have access to a few courts and indeed these court might not even have been of regulation size. We know that initially many clubs were formed on private courts (eg Hillary House, Aurora – see video from Pan Am games). Clubs often moved to provide access to more courts (eg OTLBC, TLTC) and in other cases groups splintered off to form new clubs (eg Rideau Club).

When Garnett Meldrum was President of the CLTA, he was an energetic and ubiquitous promoter of the game. He was non-playing Davis Cup captain and managed to convince the Japanese and the Australians to come to Canada to play. He organized cross-country tours with Canada’s top players, sometimes in small communities. Once he set up a court by a railway

The Spread of Tennis in Canada

Once tennis reached Canada, its popularity quickly grew. Clubs popped up across the country in many regions. Its characterization as a game for both men and women aided in its growing popularity, as clubs across the country welcomed both sexes.
siding and had spectators sit on the boxcars. He didn’t let the absence of a club interfere and he believed that once people had seen tennis they would be motivated to create tennis clubs in their community. He introduced tennis to thousands of Canadians, however his conviction that people would take the initiative to form their own clubs on the basis of seeing an exhibition match were likely unfounded.

Lawrie Strong joined the Boards of the OLTA and the CLTA in 1968. As President of the OLTA in 1970 to 1972 he established a strategic framework for tennis growth and development which involved setting up a regional network and encouraging municipalities to promote the creation of community clubs on their courts. He also introduced the first instructor certification program. With tennis experiencing a general popularity boom and with regional logistic support, many new tennis clubs were formed and organized tennis, with access to instruction and competitive play, became affordable. No more was tennis an elitist sport in Ontario.

Ontario seems to have been the only province to actively pursue a sustainable club formation strategy. Having clubs pay a membership fee based on the number of members also seems to have been an important part of making clubs and the OTA sustainable. Convincing clubs to part with the money has never been easy. Klaus Bindhardt reminisced about the tennis enthusiasts who bought him 2 drinks at $4.00 each while arguing that $2.50 for OTA fees was too high.

DOES THE OTA HAVE GOOD ARCHIVES?
The first OTA office was at 559 Jarvis Street and the first paid staff member was Don Steele. This office was set up in 1970 as part of Sport Ontario. As Government support for sport increased and broadened, the Sport Centre offices kept moving and growing. In 1980 the offices moved to Leaside at 160 Vanderhoof Avenue and in 1982 to 1220 Sheppard Avenue East. In 1995 these offices moved to 1185 Eglinton Avenue East and the OTA left the Sport Ontario Offices to move to the York University site, now the Aviva Centre, in 2005. At around that time the archival material which had been kept offsite in a storage unit was found to be unusable. However, with help from Lawrie Strong and various others along the way, Ontario Tennis has created a series of articles reflecting the history of the association. Several of these articles will be republished for the OTA centenary and it is hoped that all of these will eventually find their way into a digital archive.

In addition the OTA has a lot of photos, without documentation, waiting for someone to take on the mammoth task of identifying, culling, documenting and filing. Any volunteers?

Fortunately, several clubs have excellent archives. Clubs like the Badminton and Racquet and the Toronto Lawn are currently getting those archives professionally organized.