

Norway's Weary Club: Its name belies a long legacy of community involvement, conversation and whittling

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By Nicole Carter

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An early press clipping about the Weary Club, established by Advertiser Democrat Publisher Fred Sanborn, in 1923. *Supplied photo*

NORWAY — Norway's Weary Club has been a community fixture since its founding in 1923, when Advertiser Democrat owner and publisher Fred Sanborn rented a vacant store on Main Street where a group of like-minded friends and businessmen could meet and share pastimes, such as playing cribbage, smoking, chewing tobacco and conversation.

By 1926 the group had christened itself as the Weary Club, built a clubhouse and established a board of officers, directors and a set of by-laws. Gambling and drinking were verboten, and local gossip was permitted but restricted in nature. No more than 200 members were allowed; applicants might have to wait for a member to die before they were approved to join.

A lifetime membership cost \$25 (it is currently \$50) and was granted to those who could whittle a “shaving light enough to float.” While that requirement was dropped as the art of whittling became passé, the club maintains a supply of cedar rails in the basement, and an honorary collection of whittled wood remains in a desk drawer.

Weary Club members were known during its early era as “makers and dealers in cedar shavings, social gossip, political wisdom and Yankee philosophy.” And what is Yankee philosophy? According to longtime member and historian Ben Tucker, it is whatever members decide it is.

“That’s an example of what it (Yankee philosophy) is,” he added. “Tongue in cheek obviously. The main function of our club now is that one Saturday morning a month from 8 to 9:30 we share coffee and doughnuts. Today’s Weary Club is devoted to the art of conversation.”

Founder Sanborn worked to ensure that the Weary Club was heavily involved in community altruism. When he passed away in 1938, his will included a trust fund of \$20,000 for the club, to be invested by a local bank. Forty dollars was to be spent each Christmas on children younger than 10 who lived in the vicinity.

“We still do annual community support campaigns,” said new club President Mindy Dow Butler. “We provide two scholarships to Oxford Hills High School graduates, and donate to Christmas for Teens.”

During World War II the Weary Club served as a collection point for residents to donate tinfoil as part of the war effort.

“Those donations are listed in club records,” said Butler. “It was referred to as ‘tinsil.’ When I first saw it I didn’t realize it meant tinfoil.”

The roots of the Weary Club run deep through Norway, peaking in popularity during the 1950s and 1960s, years when Butler’s father, Neil Dow, and new club Vice President Mindy Heath’s father, Tim Heath, were heavily involved in running its affairs. The two men, along with Wayne Chandler, share exclusive membership in the club’s Legion of Honor.



Mindy Dow Butler, president of the Weary Club, holds a photo of her father, Neil Dow, who was critical to the club’s long and successful history. *Submitted photo*

Heath counts herself as one of her family’s six generations to be affiliated with the Weary Club.

“My great-grandfathers, James C. True and Timothy L. Heath, were founding members of the Weary Club,” said Heath. “My parents, Tim and Helen Heath, and my grandfather Tim Heath were members. My kids have memberships and one of my grandsons belongs as well.”

“You will see in places where it says that women could not join the club,” noted Tucker. “But this was not really the case. In those days, men had their organizations that they belonged to, but women did too. It wasn’t exclusive, but they had different interests. Women didn’t want to sit around and play cards and spit and whittle.”

Maine U.S. Sen. Margaret Chase Smith was awarded an honorary membership back in 1948, when she passed through Norway while campaigning for reelection and visited the club. Heath’s mother, Helen, was one of the first women to join the Weary Club back in 2007, and in fact was the club’s first female director.

The Weary Club was a constant, if distant, part of Butler’s and Heath’s childhoods. Heath recalls her dad as typical of his generation, in that he didn’t come home and really talk about the activities of his day.

“But I remember certain traditions from back then,” she said. “At Christmas time they would make donations to groups. And they would host Santa Claus for kids to visit with. They handed out the most awesome candies. I remember thinking they were the biggest treat ever. He’d bring them home after giving them out here as well.”

While the club officially “opened” only once a month for its coffee and doughnut sessions, it was always active in community celebrations and parades.

"It's always opened up during Art Festival days," said Heath. "Musicians would play on the porch and people would stop to listen. During my dad's later years he would come in and watch people – they could come in, look around and visit.

"There would be a Christmas parade. And the Bicentennial Parade in 1976 was huge."

"During Firemen's Carnival Week there would be a parade every night," recalled Butler. "We would sit outside Dad's law office and watch. There was a parade where people could decorate their baby carriages and bicycles. The Horrible Parade was where everyone would dress up in Halloween costumes in summer. I was just a little girl then."

"That was the heyday for parades and the Weary Club," said Tucker. "I lived out in the country and would come in evenings for the parades, but it wasn't just Norway residents, they came from everywhere. The sidewalks, both sides of the street would be full."

Butler is unsure when her father joined the Weary Club, but it was always an important part of his life.

"Until two years ago, I've lived in different areas in the South and would visit Maine during summers," Butler said. "After my mom passed away I began coming here with Dad when I visited. He encouraged me to join myself. My brother, who has a law practice here in Norway, is also a member."

"I'm going to say that your dad (Neil Dow) would have joined about the same time as Tim (Heath)," Tucker said to Butler, referring to Mindy Heath's father. "They met for breakfast, morning after morning, at the drug store."

Butler's father played a critical role in Weary Club lore after it entered into a real estate deal with its neighbor Key Bank during the 1970s.

"Key Bank was originally just a two-story building next door," explained Tucker. "They wanted to add the addition in the '70s, on the spot where the Weary Club sat. There was a gas station on the other side of the club. The bank bought the gas station and the agreement was that Weary would deed land for the addition to them, the bank would pay to move the building, set it on a foundation and all that.

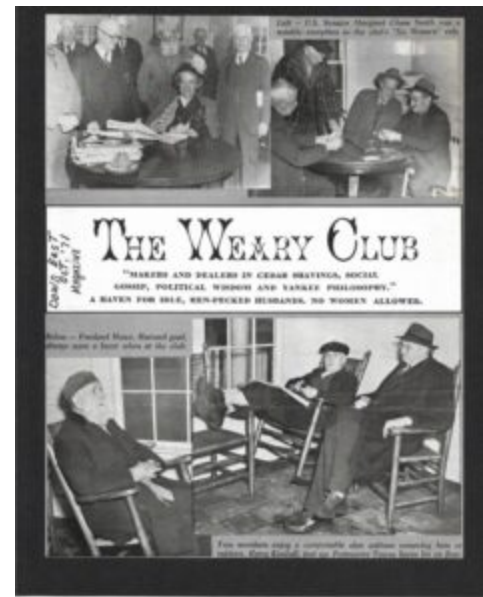
"They did do that," Tucker continued. "But years later Mindy's father, Neil, realized that we didn't have clear title from the bank. He researched it pro bono and contacted the bank's corporate attorneys, out in the Midwest somewhere. It was a slow process to correct. He said at the time, 'it's not that they aren't OK with doing it, but it's such a little thing on their radar.'"

Persistent, Neil Dow continued calling on them and digging through the deed history. He discovered that not only did the bank still have a claim on the land where the Weary Club moved, but the club still had a claim on the property the bank had built its addition on.

"So then when he called them and sent all the documentation, all of a sudden they agreed to a mutual deed swap," said Tucker. "They saw that they had to deal with it. If he hadn't gone through the trouble back then it may not have been so easily resolved.

"At first they seemed to think he was a country lawyer who wasn't paying attention, but they realized that they needed to give the Weary Club a free and clear deed to its property."

By 2007, 84 years after its founding, participation in and support of the Weary Club had begun to wane. Many of its members had passed, retired or moved out of state. Fewer and fewer people showed up for monthly coffee and doughnuts.



Down East magazine featured the Weary Club in a 1971 issue. *Supplied photo*



A big event of the Weary Club's legacy was a 50-foot move along Main Street in the name of progress. *Supplied photo*

"There wasn't a lot of (financial) support coming in," said Tucker. "It's not a club that asks for money, but occasionally members would give say \$100 to help out. Often, as members passed away, family would send donations to the Weary Club in their memory. That helped, but it was dwindling over time," he said.

"There was a by-law provision that said if interest in the club waned to the point it couldn't sustain itself, that directors could vote to dissolve the club and sell the building. It was getting to the point where they began to talk about it."

The "they" in question was Dow, Heath and Chandler, the club's Legion of Honor members. The gentlemen decided it was time to contact all members and let them know that unless there was more interest in the club it would be dissolved.

"The response was overwhelming," said Tucker, who joined the Weary Club at that point. "It was, 'Oh, we can't close the Weary Club!' That letter gave the club a shot in the arm and revitalized it."

Norway's denizens were not willing to end the legacy of the Weary Club. Financial support picked up. No longer a just a place to gather to play cards and chew tobacco, a new personality emerged as women became involved as members. The original club chairs were re-caned and restored, the roof replaced and the building painted.

"It's interesting that everyone who belongs takes their membership seriously. And the club doesn't really do anything, except devote itself to the art of conversation," Tucker noted.

"The club adopted that motto in 2007. We thought that was a good idea then, but no one realized what a good idea it would turn out to be, considering today's world."

During these days of COVID-19 the Weary Club is mostly quiet. In keeping with its tradition of temperance, Alcoholics Anonymous groups had met at the club until the pandemic made public gatherings impossible. It is unclear when the building may reopen for social events again.

But new leaders Butler and Heath look forward to getting the Weary Club's traditions back on track. After previous President Mary Lou St. John decided to step down, the duo was personally invited by Chandler and Tucker to assume leadership and infuse the club with new energy. The first thing they did was recruit other members to serve as club secretary and treasurer.

"There has always been one person handling both roles," Butler said. "But going forward, (former Norway town manager) David Holt and Sally Holt will serve as co-secretaries. They are new members. Another couple, Margie and Garry Bartlett who have been members for a while, wanted to do more work. So they now share the treasurer's duties."

Another area Butler and Heath can focus on despite the pandemic is archiving the club's history and legacy.



The Weary Club's "Legion of Honor." Clockwise from top left: Clayton E. "Tim" Heath Jr., Neil Dow, Wayne Chandler. *Supplied photo*



Club Vice President Mindy Heath and her father, Tim Heath, who was very influential in the success of the club.

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"We plan to digitize our archives," said Butler. "We have very little on the computer. Our records and rosters are in ledgers. One thing we plan to do is digitize everything.

"I'd like to learn if my grandfather, Robert Dow, was a member during his life."

"Sally Holt and I were drooling over those old documents," said Heath. "She suggested we have the library digitize and archive them. It will be so cool to know who was together in this room in 1920-something. That fascinates me."

"The history of the Weary Club is ready to be told," added Butler. "It is definitely a big project for us. Just the ledgers and registers have so much information. We can identify when members joined and for how long, where people in town were at certain times."

"When you talk about the resurrection of the Weary Club – Dow, Heath and Chandler, they changed the course of the Weary Club and saved it," said Tucker. "Those three took the place under their wing and changed it dramatically. And now Dow and Heath's daughters are leading the charge.

"They understand the pride of this club. They were both close to their dads and understood how proud they would be of them. This legacy thing, it may not be as big a deal in the rest of the country, but around here it still is," Tucker said.

The fathers' friendship and stewardship of the Weary Club is not the only thing bonding their daughters today. They have had an association since the day Mindy Heath was born.

"My parents so loved the name 'Melinda' that they named me after you," Heath told Dow. "We've always been connected, and we only just recently met!"

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A newspaper primer on the Weary Club's early history. *Supplied photo*