

Wightman Tennis Center Celebrates 40 Years

Four decades ago, on May 24, 1970, Wightman Tennis Center formally dedicated its new Modern-style clubhouse at 100 Brown Street with a ceremony honoring champion player Hazel Hotchkiss Wightman, for whom the club is named. To put this event into historical context, consider that in those days even serious players were practicing tennis in their garages during the winter.

The new center was the culmination of more than seven years of work by a dedicated group of players to build a facility for year-round tennis that would be available to everyone, regardless of race, religion, or family ancestry— provided, of course, that they could pay the dues. At the time, such a facility was essentially unavailable in the Boston area.

The founders were avid tennis players. Some were champions. At their first organizational meeting in June 1962, they agreed to look for property with a minimum of 10 acres within a 25- minute drive for potential members, most of whom lived in Newton. In December 1963, The Garden City Family Recreation Center,

Inc. was incorporated as a non-profit, non-sectarian club, owned by its members, for the purpose “of constructing and maintaining an athletic and recreation center for swimming, tennis, squash, and other forms of athletics; for the promotion of physical fitness and wholesome social contacts and relationships and for the purpose of good citizenship.”

The original incorporators were Harrison F. “Rosie”



Left: Internationally renowned tennis champion Hazel Wightman and club president Harrison Rowbotham Sr. wield symbolic shovels at ground-breaking ceremonies on February 19, 1969, for the \$1,250,000 Hazel Hotchkiss Wightman Tennis Center. (Courtesy Wightman Tennis Center)



To break up the vast roof surfaces, the building was divided into three staggered sections. Note the low silhouette and sweeping lines. (Photo c.1969 courtesy Wightman Tennis Center)

Rowbotham Sr., President; Sidney L. Cohen, Treasurer; and Bernard “Bill” J. Pearson, Clerk; also Irving Karg, Way-Dong Woo, Anthony J. Minichiello, and Sumner “Sonny” Rodman, whose brother Bert was also an important founding member. Rowbotham had taken his first tennis lesson at age 9 with Hazel Wightman. He became a nationally ranked player, winner of 168 sanctioned tournaments, and New England’s Number One in Men’s Singles in 1945. He also developed a winning doubles game with Sumner Rodman, and the pair was ranked Number One in New England for seven years and Number Five nationally in 1941. As a long-time president of the New England Lawn Tennis Association and later vice-president at the national level, Rowbotham worked tirelessly to build tennis throughout New England. Beginning in 1960 he headed the Youth Tennis Foundation, dedicated to training promising young players and making tennis available as a healthy sport in urban areas.

Two years were expended on an unsuccessful effort to procure a 99-year lease of Metropolitan District Commission land in Newton bordering the Charles River. Next, the Center sought to obtain a variance on land on the Newton-Boston line adjacent to the Commonwealth Country Club. Because of strong opposition by abutters, the club decided to drop the purchase option.

The present land in Weston was optioned in 1967, subject to obtaining a special permit. The founders sensed that there was opposition in Weston, in part because the group was mainly from Newton. To counter this perception, they enlisted the help of Weston residents Bill Brown, H. Kenneth Fish, and Jerome Rosen and

Mortgage signing, February 1969: Top row l-r, Bernard "Bill" Pearson, Sidney Cohen, and Henry Gesmer, attorney for City Bank. Bottom row: Harrison Rowbotham, Hazel Wightman, and Rubin Epstein, president of City Bank. (Courtesy Wightman Tennis Center)



sweetened the deal by promising to make at least 50% of the memberships available to Westonites. The Zoning Board granted the special permit on February 29, 1968, with additional conditions including a limit of 300 Family and 100 Youth memberships, a ban on liquor and on food other than a snack bar, and a limit of eight lighted outdoor courts

On December 1, 1967, the original corporate name was changed to The Hazel Hotchkiss Wightman Tennis Center Inc. in honor of Hazel Wightman (1886-1974), the widely admired "First Lady of Tennis" or "Queen Mother of American Tennis," depending on the sports writer's preferred analogy. Wightman agreed to lend her name at the request of Rowbotham, who had first met her years earlier at his first tennis lesson.

Hazel Wightman won more national tennis titles, a total of 45, than any other player in the history of the sport, according to a 1974 obituary in the *Boston Herald American*. She began her reign at the 1909 U.S. Women's Championships by winning every event she entered: women's singles, women's double, and mixed doubles, a grand slam repeated the following two years. In 1923, she donated a silver cup, known as the Wightman Cup, to the U.S. Lawn Tennis Association for a women's tennis tournament between the United States and Great Britain similar to the men's Davis Cup. She won the Olympic doubles and mixed doubles in 1924 and was also a national singles squash champion, Massachusetts state table tennis champion, and national mixed badminton finalist. Remarkably, she never took a cent of payment for her play or instruction.

The 16.5 acres on Brown and Winter Streets was acquired on April 2, 1968 from Krist E. Apog, et.al for \$110,000. The firm of Sasaki, Dawson, DeMay Associates, Architects was hired to design and supervise construction, with Kenneth DeMay as principal architect in charge.

Gypsies, Biplanes, Rhododendrons: What was there before WTC?



The property purchased by Wightman founders in 1968 has a unique history. At the corner of Brown and Winter Streets, adjacent to the tennis club, is one of Weston's six district schoolhouses, constructed in 1853. The nearby pine forests were once a favorite camping ground for gypsies. Estate owner Charles Jones purchased the schoolhouse and 95 acres of land in 1908 and converted the school into a two-family house for his herdsman and horse trainers. Around 1919-20, part of this land was leased for a "flying field" or "airdrome." Runways were cut through the forest and a U-shaped airplane hanger was created by connecting the Jones cow and horse barns. In 1923, Latvian immigrant Peter John Mezitt purchased the property, including the schoolhouse and flying fields. He founded Weston Nurseries, which would become internationally known for developing new plant varieties. Mezitt allowed the pilots to stay, and family members recall stories of him chasing planes down the runway with his truck, preventing takeoff until the pilots had paid their rent. The airport operated until June 1926, when a spectacular fire destroyed the hanger and 18 aircraft. Weston Nurseries began relocating to Hopkinton after World War II; and by 1950, all propagation and shipping facilities had been moved there. The family maintained a sales outlet in Weston for several more years. When the club bought the property in 1968, the barn in the photo above was part of the purchase. (Courtesy Wightman Tennis Center)

The next challenge was financing. The organizers were turned down by bank after bank wary of lending to the project because the property was permitted for only one use. In February 1969, a mortgage loan commitment was obtained from the small City Bank and Trust Company for \$800,000. As a condition, each intended member had to personally guarantee the bank against loss, up to \$3000 per member. The Charles Logue Building Company commenced construction in March 1969.

The \$1.25 million dollar center opened on July 1, 1969 with four indoor courts, 10 outdoor courts, two squash courts, indoor and outdoor swimming pools, a sauna, lockers and shower rooms for men and women, a pro shop, and a central lounge area providing picture window viewing of the indoor tennis, squash, and swimming activities.

In the early years, the club was used mainly by its male members. Long waits for courts were not unusual. The original women's locker room was small and inadequate, and use by women increased after these facilities were expanded and improved. Two courts were added in 1975; and in 2001-02, the squash courts were removed and the space remodeled to create a large exercise room.

The original founders envisioned a Youth Program offering low cost memberships or scholarships to promising players under 21. In the early years, the club had a number of excellent youth members who went on to become championship players. Because the courts were in such demand, the youth memberships were largely discontinued by the mid-1970s. Wightman also hosted the Wightman Invitational junior tournament for boys and girls from age 11 to 18, but this in-

BUD COLLINS

A private club — for all

Weston never did get the Greater Boston stadium that John Volpe sought to build there two years ago. This disappointed one of the settlers named Tom Scott, who figured that the Red Sox dug-out would have been located in his living room. Mrs. Scott was not as enthusiastic: "I don't know that I would have cared for Jim Nance and Jim Whalen running through our petunias."

With eight outdoor courts and four indoor courts, outdoor and indoor pools, and squash courts framed by the stunning architecture of Sasaki, Dawson, DeMay & Associates, the Wightman Center will become one of the country's finest tennis clubs.

I hope that its pioneering policies in regard to membership will not be lost on other clubs. Tennis and golf have been considerably less than enlightened in this area.



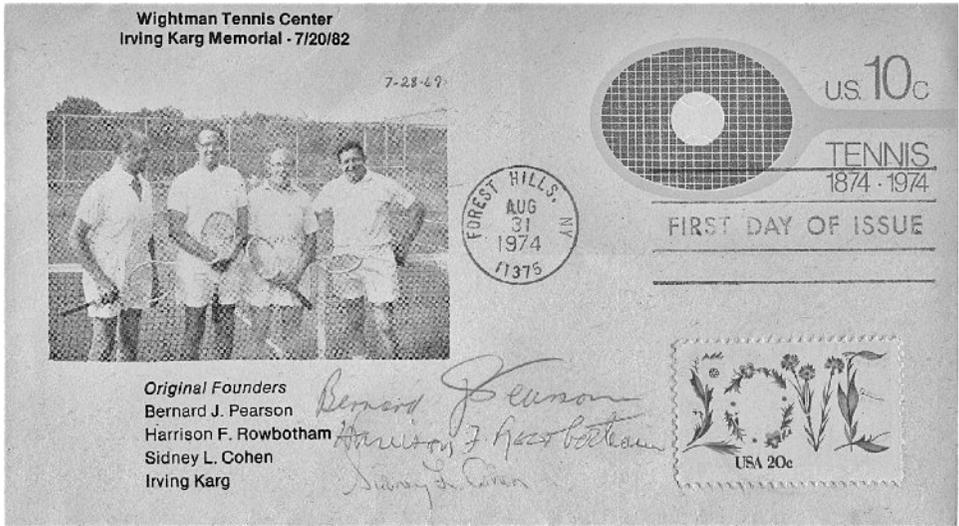
This photo, taken shortly after the opening of the clubhouse in 1970, shows the original design for the stair railings leading up to the main entrance. (Photo courtesy Wightman Tennis Center).

involved closing the facility for four days in June and was discontinued. From about 1974 to 1988, Wightman had an age-group swimming team.

In a 1969 article entitled “A private club—for all,” *Boston Globe* journalist and tennis commentator Bud Collins hailed the new club as “an athletic club for all peoples,” adding “Color, race, religion, politics have nothing to do with entrance requirements.” He explained then-customary policies as follows:

As centers of sportsmanship, most of New England and America’s private athletic clubs are a fraud. Sportsmanship, to be genuine, has to go beyond games, and extend to life outside the toy department. Almost without exception, these clubs—the pillars of tennis, golf, swimming, boating, riding—are bigoted and restrictive in their admission policies.

The people raising the handsome Wightman Center in Weston will not go that way. Among the 300 family memberships are Negroes, Jews, people of all faiths and convictions. ”It is a private club,” says a prime mover, the president, Harrison Rowbotham, “but not in the usual sense. We are taking people on the basis of their being acceptable citizens—and, of course, for their ability to pay the bills.”



The Irving Karg Memorial Trophy was established in 1982 honoring Karg's work as founder, secretary, member of the board, and long-time friend of the club. (Courtesy Wightman Tennis Center)

While Wightman membership has always been open to all, only a few African-Americans have ever been members. The club has traditionally had a large Jewish membership. Of the original 300 members, 19 are still members today.

Wightman has two staff members who have worked at the club almost from the beginning. Phyllis Simm has served as office manager since the fall of 1972. Bill Grimes joined the staff in June 1973 and has managed the club since the mid-1970s. Grimes reflected on changes he has seen over the years:

In the beginning, it was tennis, tennis, and more tennis. The original members cared about tennis. There were long waits for courts. Now we have an exercise room, and some members prefer swimming. Also, the club is no longer a novelty. Tennis has passed its peak years of popularity. In our more affluent times, many people play golf and have summer or winter houses. People have other things to do.

H. Kenneth Fish, an original Weston member, looked back on the early years and made this observation about how his family used the club:

In addition to tennis, squash and swimming, it was a great place for families to get together. When our three daughters were young, I would meet them and [my wife] Imogene after work during the summer at the Center. I would swim with the girls or play tennis with Imogene while the girls played or watched us play tennis. After a little exercise, we would have a

picnic on the grounds or near the outdoor pool. It was a wonderful place for families to be together.

by Pamela W. Fox

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References:

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Color postcard with aerial view of The Hazel Hotchkiss Wightman Tennis Center around the time of its opening in 1970. (Courtesy Wightman Tennis Center)