



A Short History of the Longbranch Improvement Club

In the early 1920's, The Longbranch Improvement Club (the "LIC") was organized by a group of residents at the southern end of Key Peninsula. For years before, they had been meeting in private homes to organize Halloween parties, New Year's Eve dances at the Library Hall, and baseball games. During those early years, baseball was a critical part of life on the peninsula. Each village had a baseball team and games were major entertainment on the weekends. Teams from Steilacoom, Tacoma, Puyallup, Anderson and McNeil Islands boated to the peninsula to play the Longbranch team. Baseball was so popular, attracting so many spectators, that a larger new ball field was needed.

The roaring twenties were a period of rapid change for the little village. Pierce County was planning the first road to serve the Key Peninsula, even though there was no bridge to the mainland. The new road routed traffic up the Peninsula from the county ferry slip at Longbranch. The new road would also make possible a long-needed consolidated elementary school for the Longbranch area. A site for the school with a large athletic field was needed. Working cooperatively with county officials, the Longbranch community group decided to become a legally constituted group that could own land and work formally "to improve the community."

On December 10, 1921, the LIC was incorporated as a non-profit corporation under the laws of the State of Washington with a charter for the "betterment of schools, homemaking, roads and marketing dairy and poultry and all its branches." The charter also stated the club would be "buying real estate for the purpose of a

consolidated school, for athletic and picnic uses" and announced member dues would be 50 cents annually. Less than a month later, the LIC purchased ten acres adjacent to the anticipated county road from Andy Simonson for \$500, a significant amount in 1921, when annual farm income was only \$275.

That spring, when the ferry Elk made its first trip from Steilacoom to the county ferry dock at Longbranch, the LIC leaders proudly announced that ten acres of land for a fine ball park and tourist camp had been bought and a consolidated school was going to be built. The following year, LIC volunteers cleared and leveled the acreage for a baseball field between the salmon-running stream and the proposed county road. They built a covered grandstand with a lower level concession stand. Back then, the LIC met in Penrose Hall at the Longbranch Congregational Church, later renamed the Longbranch Community Church. In 1924 the club donated the south three acres of its property to the Pierce County School District to build the two-room consolidated School #328.

As planning for the Tacoma Narrows Bridge moved ahead, the school district needed to build for the increased population anticipated. In 1938, the Pierce County School District purchased land adjacent to the three acres that LIC had already donated. In 1939 the Federal Works Progress Administration erected a timber and stone gymnasium for the School #328 building located about 100 feet to the north. This building, now the LIC Clubhouse, is architecturally distinct with large-scale rustic architecture combining stone walls, log rafters and concrete buttresses. WPA workers and construction materials were brought in by boat, joining local workers. It has a stone foundation with hand-mixed concrete buttresses flying out at the sides to lend support to walls bearing the

weight of the immense, steeply sloped cedar shake roof. Local timber was used; the LIC archives have copies of receipts for oxen rental and stumpage fees. Heated by large fireplaces, the building served as a dirt-floor school gymnasium. The east end housed a school kitchen and lunchroom. When the county began busing children to a larger Lakebay school, the LIC took responsibility for managing the gymnasium as a community center.

Community activities at the LIC included holiday dances and special events like the annual Huckleberry Festival Dance. These dances became famous around the South Sound region where many people had boats that could bring them to Longbranch and the ferry brought people from Steilacoom. For many years, basket socials were popular. Longbranch ladies would pack their best lunch in a fancy basket and the men would bid for a chance to have lunch with their favorite lady. During the Second World War, the Ladies Aid rolled bandages here. When the Congregational Church started sliding down the hill above the marina during the 1930s and was finally abandoned in 1939, the clubhouse was pressed into duty as a church. It served as a church and Sunday school until 1948 when the new Longbranch Community Church was erected. There were fewer churches on the peninsula then, and the congregation was large, with as many as 70 children in Sunday school.

In 1956 the LIC purchased the gymnasium from the School District for \$7,000. The purchase included the three acres the club had donated to the county years before. Even before formal ownership of the building, club members replaced the dirt floor with hand-mixed concrete under an oak dance floor and restrooms were added. In 1958, the club sold for "\$1 and other valuable consideration" a piece of property 100 feet by 100 feet at the north end of the property

for construction of a fire station by the County Fire Protection District.

After the new Narrows Bridge was opened in 1950, county ferry service to Longbranch was discontinued. The abandoned ferry dock, although falling into disrepair, remained. Longbranch's beautiful sheltered harbor on Filucy Bay had become a popular stop for South-Sound boaters over the years. On warm weekends, up to 100 boats would visit the harbor, according to the Tacoma News Tribune. There was no easy way to go ashore without anchoring and rowing in dinghy. In 1956, club members asked county Commissioners if the abandoned ferry dock could be improved for used by boaters. Although the county approved the idea, there was no public money available for needed improvements.

LIC volunteers, led by Ramon Bussard and W. H. Duerden, donated labor, expertise and timber to construct a dock and floats. These were attached to the county wharf that connected to the shore. After a festive opening ceremony in spring of 1956, the LIC has continuously operated the Longbranch Marina, providing day-to-day guest moorage with permanent and temporary moorage for LIC members.

During the 1970's and 1980's the LIC hosted potluck dinners, benefit dances, community theatre, garage sales, a nursery school, and continuing education classes. In 1976, the Longbranch Bicentennial Fair featured a production of the Civil War military comedy, *Shenandoah*, with battle scenes staged on the open field. The two-day celebration also featured a baseball game, dinghy races, skydivers and aerobatics by antique stunt planes.

In September 1986, Pierce County Department of Planning and Development completed an inventory of rural and suburban public school buildings and nominated the building for the

Pierce County Register of Historic Places. Subsequently, the Washington State Advisory Council on Historic Preservation determined the building was worthy of nomination for the National Register of Historic Places, under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service. In November 1987, LIC was notified that the building had been added to the National Register of Historic Places. "The National Register records the tangible reminders of the history of the United States and is the official list of the nation's cultural resources worthy of preservation." In the 1990's, a major club project was replacement of the marina floats and creation of a covered pavilion for members and guest boaters. A major clubhouse renovation was undertaken; modern restrooms, kitchen upgrades, and new oak flooring throughout. Today, the club still faces replacing the rusting, steeply pitched metal roof.

Following our 1921 charter to operate "for the betterment of the community", the club has sponsored fundraising, cultural and entertainment events. These community-building events include dances, yard & garage sales, concerts, and dinner theatre. LIC leadership has kept the organization involved in the local community and participates with other non-profit arts and social service organizations:

- Since 1996, club members periodically de-litter miles of the Key Peninsula Highway under the Adopt-a-Highway Program
- Fire Department Medevac training on our athletic field
- The club donates use of the building and grounds to many local tax exempt organizations and groups. The LIC partners with many of these organizations, and an example includes the Evergreen (Elementary) School PTA for such events as "Trunk-or-Treat", and the US Marine Corps.

"Toys for Tots" program for Kids & Christmas.

- LIC was a founding partner in the Key Peninsula Community Fair in 2001
- The Fiber Arts Show, a part of the Pierce County Farm Tour, showcases the work of all forms of fiber craft, art and goods

The building and grounds are also available for private group and party rentals.

Members of the LIC have a very long tradition of supporting a scholarship program and local children from elementary school through college. The LIC, however, is a 501(c)4 tax exempt social welfare organization, which means donations to it are not deductible by donors, but this status does allow the LIC to receive other revenue streams, such as membership dues, building rents, and marina fees exempt from federal tax subject to certain restrictions. In order to facilitate the LIC's mission, The Longbranch Foundation ("TLF") was formed in 2016 as a 501 (c)3 charitable organization. TLF shares essentially the same overall goal "To improve the Community". TLF is a separate organization, but is affiliated with the LIC, and it has six separate distinct charitable purposes. At the forefront of the charitable purposes is support for students and today Evergreen Elementary "graduates" enjoy LIC/TLF support for educational experiences as well as school and personal supplies, middle schoolers receive a grant to support their musical program, and scholarships are funded for graduating seniors at Peninsula High School.

Other charitable purposes include preservation of the LIC's historic building, improve Filucy Bay ecology and public safety at the Longbranch Marina, enhancement of trails, support of other like-minded organizations and other needs in the community.

At this time, TLF sponsors one major fundraising event annually – a “Super Sale” in even number years, and a gala and auction in odd numbered years. It also does a one-time annual solicitation that allows donors to contribute as little as \$1.00 to the charitable purpose of their choice. Improvement requires investment of both time and money. Both the LIC and TLF function only because of our extensive volunteer support. Please join in with us!

Visit the TLF website to learn much more about it at www.longbranchfoundation.org