

# Hard-scrabble early Duluth dolled up in boating finery

In 1886, Duluth was at the edge of the frontier, virtually a wilderness outpost in the eyes of the civilized world. In cities along the East Coast, investors looked upon Duluth as a place with a certain distant, harsh appeal as they plotted their investments in land, timber, shipping and minerals.

Duluth was only a city of potential, a place of dreams and vision, if uncertain. And while the name itself sounded a bit rough, it could



The Port's Past  
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be packaged with words like "Zenith City" to give it enough of a luster to catch the eye of potential partners.

For those living closer to the actual site, along the wooded slopes and ravines of post-glacial Lake Superior, Duluth was a jewel in the rough, and getting it to shine for all to see was going to take a lot of toil and inspiration. What amenities Duluth had were primarily a diversion from everyday life, there for the enjoyment of the local populace only. Anyone looking to find the entertainment opportunities of a big city had best get off the boat at Chicago. Quite frankly, Duluth was not what you could call a place of destination.

So it was, in this same year of 1886, that the Duluth Boat Club

was formed. Presaging the great promise of the Zenith City by adding an air of gentility, the club provided much-needed relief from the city's hard-scrabble existence and its undeniably difficult winters.

At first, the Boat Club was more of a social organization than it was an athletic club. Indeed, it would be many years before any renown was

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ever garnered by athletic prowess. At the onset, the Duluth Boat Club built its first pine emporium along Sixth Avenue West and the waterfront, near the Northern Pacific freight sheds. The club maintained its headquarters there for the first 16 years of its existence.

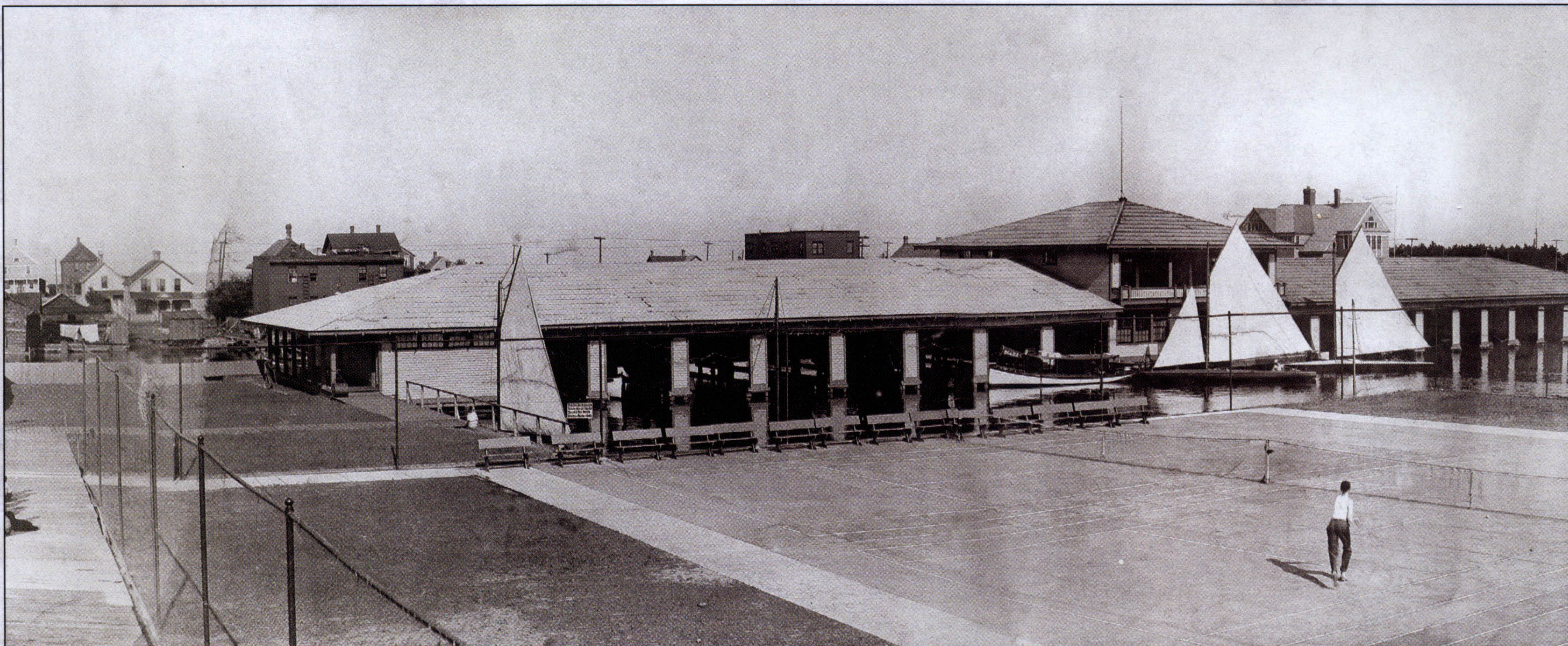
By the turn of the century, Duluth, as a city, had come of age, commerce in the harbor boomed and the value of waterfront property soared. The boat club constantly found its wharves mired in vessel traffic. A steady growth of warehouses and passenger slips encroached from the east, while the riotous, riveting din of MacDougall's shipyard to the west was replaced with rail yards and thunderous, smoke-belching locomotives.

It was no wonder that the membership grew rebellious. Gentlemen sporting cream-colored suits and society women shaded beneath white parasols were constantly being coated with soot or grain dust. The hulls of their fine wooden sailing craft were jostled and marred by slag and mill ends from saw mills on Rice's Point. Shouts from drunken sailors and railroad roustabouts accosted them. Duluth was growing up, and the Boat Club needed to grow, too. To accomplish this goal, it would need a location away from the bustling harbor.

In 1902 the Duluth Boat Club moved across the bay, to neighboring Park Point. Located along St. Louis Avenue, between 10th and 12th Streets, the new club was a majestic addition to the waterfront. Membership quickly soared to 1,400, with more waiting to join. The new site boasted a dining area with a view on all four sides, new boat launching houses, tennis courts and the largest "nanatorium" (from the Latin, for indoor swimming pool) in the region. Local boosters touted the location as "the finest of any club on the Great Lakes."

With Duluth no longer occupying the title as princess of the pioneer, its civic institutions were prone to more scrutiny from the outside. Club president Julius Barnes, who had earned his respect as a businessman, wanted the same stature for his city. One sure way to gain the recognition of the East Coast establishment was to beat them at their



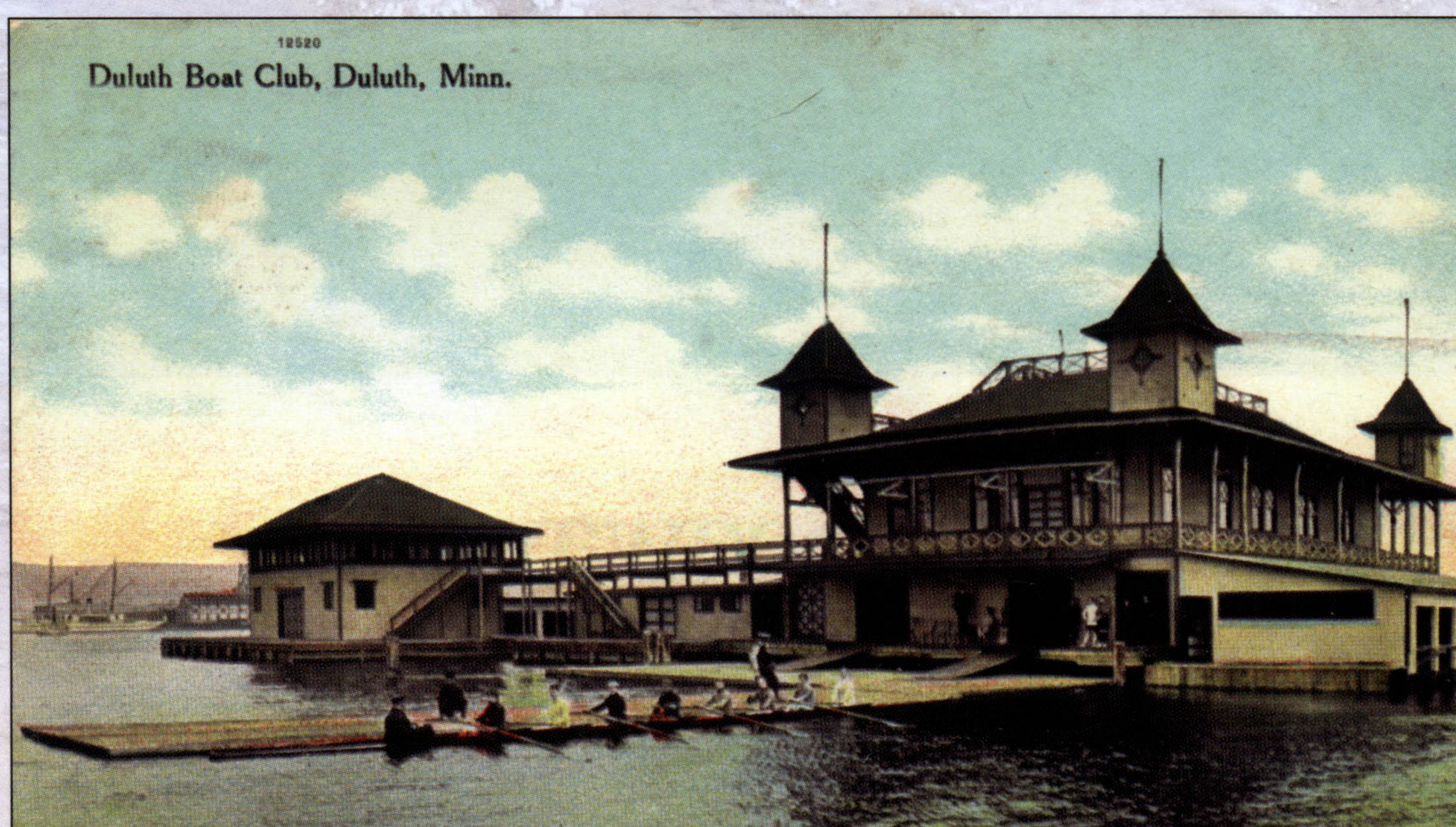


**Water sports and lawn games among the upper crust were staples of the Duluth Boat Club.**

own game: rowing. For Barnes, the Duluth Boat Club offered the perfect vehicle.

Barnes turned the club from a social institution to a sporting one. He recruited and paid for the best rowing coaches to help bring the Duluth Boat Club into national prominence. From 1911 to 1925, rowing crews from the club regularly finished first or second in regional and national contests. They brought home medals, and they set national records. In 1922, Duluth Boat Club member Walter Hoover won the "diamond sculling championship of the world on the Thames River, in London." The Duluth Boat Club entered the Roaring Twenties at the head of the class.

The flame of the Duluth Boat Club burned bright and hot, but by the mid-20s it was nearly extinguished. Changes in lifestyles caused a decline in memberships, bringing financial difficulties to the club. Former club president and financial backer Barnes, in con-



**There was nothing else in the Twin Ports like the Boat Club.**

junction with club president B. D. Ramsey, regrettably announced in October 1926 that the club properties would be put up for sale and the club dissolved.

Plans to restore the glory days have been underway for several years, and are nearing fruition. A resurrected Duluth Boat Club, recently formed as a non-profit, umbrella organization to promote sustainable boating organizations is in the process of building a new

facility along a two-block stretch of Park Point. The new facility will have conference rooms, meeting areas and banquet facilities and will be home to a number of affiliated members, such as the Duluth Superior Sailing Association, Duluth Yacht Club, and of course, the Duluth Rowing Club.

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