

# A club for all seasons

Revisiting the past at the South Side Sportsmen's Club

By RICK CHALIFOUX



ABOVE: The South Side Sportsmen's Club was a respite for the elite.  
BELOW: The newly restored Grist Mill is one of the few remaining in the country.

SCN/Chalifoux



**OAKDALE**—Last Saturday afternoon, a special historical lecture was given inside the Connetquot River State Park and Preserve by volunteer docent, Mark Romaine. The illuminating presentation, sponsored by the Friends of Connetquot, showcased the rich history of both the property and its many inhabitants and visitors over the last few centuries.

The main focus of the talk was the historic South Side Sportsmen's Clubhouse, which has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1973. Originally built in 1820 as Snedecor's Tavern, the building was used as a clubhouse by members of the South Side Sportsmen's Club of Long Island – including members of the local Bourne and Vanderbilt families – from 1866 to 1973.

While there were a great number of prominent, well-known members of the club over the course of its history, Romaine highlighted some of the lesser-known individuals with ties to the property.

“Interestingly enough, so many people make up what this property became,” said Romaine, who also gives tours of the building on the first Sunday of every month. “It's not just the people you've heard of, but the people who worked here, developed the land, kept game, and maintained the hatcheries.”

In its heyday, the extremely exclusive club offered a respite for elite members of society to engage in a number of outdoor activities, from deer and duck hunting to trout fishing.

“Many clubs you belong to you sign up for, you pay your dues, and when you've had enough of it, you stop going and that's the end of it,” said Romaine. “Here, the membership was limited to 100 and each member would buy a share, so members actually owned the property together. In that aspect, it was a very unique endeavor.”

In fact, Romaine said that the main attraction and one of the core reasons the property even existed as it did in the first place was because of its plentiful trout stream, which morphed into a hatchery. Recognizing its unique offerings, members and surrounding landowners made sure to keep the tracts as healthy and unimpeded as possible.

“You can build a golf course and you can even build a place like Central Park,” said Romaine. “However, it's very difficult to build a trout stream because you

need cold, clean, constant fresh water that the trout would be able to not only live in, but spawn in, with areas for young trout to grow.”

While many might expect that the members' high degrees of wealth and social status would make for a lavish, opulent facility, Romaine said that it was more of a place where they could let loose and take a break from such surroundings.

“This wasn't the place for them to be opulent,” said Romaine. “It was a place they could let their hair down. They had houses on 5th Avenue and homes in Newport for that. If you're living your whole life where you've got several homes in a number of different places, at some point it just feels nice to be able to put on a pair of muddy boots, go shooting in the morning, fish during the day, then hang around with some dogs and other guys, maybe have a drink or two.”

Meanwhile, Romaine said the employees that worked for the club and lived on the land could hardly be called servants. Rather, they offered critical knowledge of the landscape as well as the finer points of hunting and fishing.

“These people weren't servants; they were highly regarded professionals,” said Romaine. “If you've ever fished or hunted, you know that it's very difficult to be good at it. These guys knew the property well, and knew where these guys needed to be in order to be successful.”

Today, the facility houses the New York State Regional Environmental Education Office and Interpretive Center, historic exhibits, and functions as a learning space for BOCES. Overall, the site has been generally unimpeded by the passage of time, and a walk around its outdoor trails and indoor facilities offers a glimpse into a much simpler time.

“So much of it is still the way it was then,” said Romaine. “Or at least very close to it.”

Friends of Connetquot is a nonprofit, volunteer organization dedicated to the preservation and conservation of the Connetquot River State Park Preserve. With 3,472 acres claspings the Connetquot River, the preserve is the largest piece of open space in Western Suffolk County. Access to the preserve is open year round to the public from sunrise to sunset. The Friends welcome volunteers for its various events and services. To learn more about Friends of Connetquot, visit [www.friendsofconnetquot.org](http://www.friendsofconnetquot.org). ■

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The snowy, ice-covered landscape of the park is a beautiful sight.