

The Otter Street Fishing Club: A Story of Conservation and Community

By: Linda Nikolaus

Let's take a stroll down memory lane; a story that's over 55 years in the making. Picture a blistery cold Wisconsin winter, your ice fishing gear, and a desire to do more for your fishing community. That is precisely where the Otter Street Fishing Club began its journey. Providing safe access to the frozen lake was where the Otter Street Fishing Club got its start nearly six decades ago. As we continue our walk down memory lane you can get a glimpse into our past and you'll watch the history of Otter Street unfold. You have the ability to help us shape our future.

The Otter Street Fishing Club began back in 1961 as strictly an ice fishing club with the purpose of supplying ice bridges and plowed roads to those looking to access Lake Winnebago during Wisconsin's coldest winters. The Club was comprised of nearly a dozen guys looking for ways to achieve this end goal. Shortly after its inception in '61, the Club was maintaining ice bridges and plowing roads on Winnebago for the fishing community to use. Over the next 55 years Otter Street would go on to evolve into so much more. Now, fast forward to present day, here we are with over 700 life members, and over 1,000 annual members, and the influence of the Club's outreach is continuing to have lasting and truly profound impacts. Throughout the years, the Club's mission has evolved and broadened in scope; now serving to provide the betterment of fishing on our Lake Winnebago system. To serve our mission, Otter Street has provided over \$750,000 in donations for various projects within our community; for example: building and maintaining fishing docks and launches, a DNR shocking boat, hosting community events to increase involvement in the sport of fishing and the Sauger project; which had the end goal of bringing up the population of the Sauger species that was nearly extinct in our area. The reach of Otter Street extends much further than those listed above, and is truly as result of our dedicated Board of Directors, members, volunteers and sponsors. One of the main ways we are able to fund our community outreach projects is by hosting several events throughout the year. Starting in February, we hold an annual two-day Fisheree that includes bands, raffles, races and a fishing contest. This event, dubbed our "Winter Fisheree," was the Club's first fundraiser, and continues to be very popular within the Oshkosh community. Next up, come March, is our Wild Game Feed, which as you probably guessed, is a banquet style event wherein local chefs prepare several different kinds of wild game (think: deer, squirrel, alligator, moose). In case you were

wondering, the squirrel is actually extremely delicious! Moving onto our flagship event of the year, our Summer Walleye Tournament is always held Father's Day weekend of each year. This event has an amazing history to it, and we're looking forward to its continued growth. Otter Street held its first Walleye Tournament in 1981, hosting a modest 30 boats. By 1989, through word of mouth and increased engagement, the tourney grew to 300 boats and was a part of the Masters Walleye Circuit. Most recently, our 2016 tournament had 326 teams and paid \$105,000 in cash and prizes, making it the largest walleye tournament in the United States. We are fully expecting to maintain that title as we prepare for the 2017 tournament. When it comes to our events, we finish out the year with an event that is close to our member's hearts: The Kid's Fisheree. This event is held annually, in August, and is dedicated to bringing up the next generation of anglers. The Kid's Fisheree is a free event for children ages 3-12, where they compete to win a fishing contest within various categories, earn prizes, trophies and partake in a morning of fishing with their families. This event typically draws several hundred children, who walk away from the event with fishing gear, great memories and the beginning of a lifelong passion and appreciation for the sport of fishing.

The common denominator with all of our events and outreach is the support that Otter Street receives from its members, volunteers, sponsors, Board of Directors, and local community. That passion and shared dedication to the betterment of fishing on our lakes is what makes it possible to give back to the community in the many ways that we do. Our events and day to day operations are executed by dedicated volunteers who have a true interest for the conservation efforts and sport of fishing that our Club's mission and bylaws embody.

As we wrap up this trip down memory lane, we reflect on what has made us so impactful in the the past and look forward to duplicating those efforts and growing our Club in the future, by remaining one of the most seasoned and reliable Fishing Clubs in our community.

There are many ways to get involved with Otter Street; we welcome new members and volunteers who share the same interest for our local community, and as a Club remain dedicated to growing our size and events so we can maximize future contributions and donations within our local community. For additional information, please follow Otter Street Fishing Club on Facebook.