



A couple of anglers ready for a tournament on Oneida Lake.

# 75 YEARS of working for a better Oneida Lake

STORY BY JOHN PITARRESI | PHOTOS COURTESY OF ONEIDA LAKE ASSOCIATION

**T**ony Buffa was maybe 10 years old when his uncle first took him fishing on Oneida Lake's Big Bay.

To say it was the beginning of a love affair, one he shares with a great many others, is no exaggeration. Buffa has spent the last seven decades fishing on Oneida Lake, the recreational gem and important economic engine that is plopped down right in the middle of Central New York.

A former mathematics professor at Onondaga Community College, Buffa is in his 45th season as a fishing guide on the lake, and he has been a member and a board member of the Oneida Lake Association, the lake's primary watchdog organization, all of that time.

He's proud of that and proud that OLA and its approximately 2,000 members are celebrating the organization's 75th

birthday this year.

OLA was founded in December 1945. According to John Harmon's history in the organization's latest bulletin, Benjamin Sauer was the first president, and the first annual meeting was held the next spring at Syracuse's Central High School. Membership quickly grew to about 1,000.

"The history of it is remarkable," Buffa said. "It has survived the test of time. It's all volunteer work, and we (board members) are all professionals, but we find the time to meet monthly and have our yearly meeting, so the membership is informed as well as we are."

"Fisheries is a major part of our concern. Environmental issues are another important item, along with law enforcement, water levels. We are an advocate for people who use the lake in any shape or form."

Dealing with the presence of double-crested cormorants, major predators of game fish, has been a key subject for the last 25 years, as well.

"They were totally out of control in the '90s and 2000s," Buffa said. "We got behind an effort to get the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on the lake to get the cormorants under control. That was one of the biggest things we've done."

Over the years, OLA has developed relationships with a variety of entities that provide important information and services for lake users: the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, the DEC's Oneida Fish Cultural Station, Cornell University's Biological Field Station at Shackleton Point, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and others.



## OLA OFFICERS FOR 2020

**President:** Bill Girvan

**Vice Presidents:** Warren Darby, John Harmon

**Treasurer:** Lance Vella

**Secretary:** Ryan Asmus

**Directors:** Bruce Schantz, Ryan Asmus, Mike Barretta, Edward Mills, Gina Duggleby, George Reck, Anthony Buffa, Bill Girvan, Richard Colasante, Robert Cote, Carl Ford, Matt Kazmierski, Greg Keener, Bob Walczyk, Patricio Cerro-Reehil, Kurt Snyder, Warren Darby, Matt Snyder, Tom Guifre, Lance Vella and John Harmon

## HOW TO BECOME A MEMBER

Membership in the Oneida Lake Association is \$8 annually. It includes two bulletins a year and an invitation to the OLA's annual meeting, normally held in April.

Membership applications are available online at <http://www.oneidalakeassociation.org/application.htm>.

If you are not online, the membership fee can be sent to Oneida Lake Association Inc., P.O. Box 3536, Syracuse, N.Y. 13220.

Oneida Lake has been a fish factory throughout its history. Native Americans harvested salmon there for hundreds if not thousands of years. Eels, northern pike and other food fish also were taken. Sport fishing on the lake took off in the 19th century. By the 1890s, walleyes had become the dominant species, giving rise to a significant commercial fishery. Netting of walleyes was outlawed in 1897, the year the first hatchery at Constantia was built, but the practice went underground and "fish pirates" became notorious on the lake.

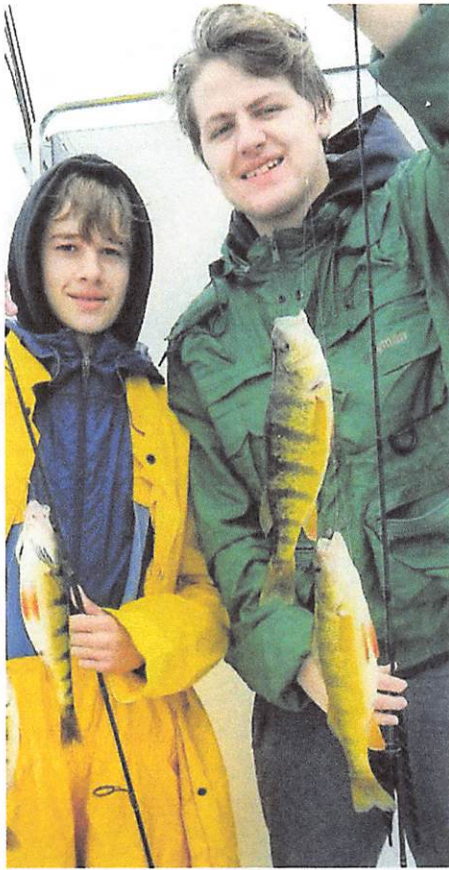
It took until 1961, but the OLA finally convinced the state to outlaw the sale of walleyes.

"That was one of the biggest things they did," said Tom Pierce, a former member who has lived on the North Shore since 1984 and fished the lake for many years before that. "That was one of the reasons the OLA was formed originally. And they were organized. They had power. Now, you have to have so many votes to get things done. In the old days, they were



Yellow perch are top targets for Oneida Lake anglers.





Young anglers enjoy catching perch on Oneida Lake – sometimes two at a time.

doctors and lawyers and judges and they had power to get things done.”

How did the OLA get things done?

“I think the leadership of the OLA has been its strongest quality,” said Richard “Rip” Colasante, another long-time board member and a former cold water supervisor for the Constantia hatchery and several other DEC facilities. “The presidents have carried the day and done what needed to be done to protect the lake. They forged very strong relationships with local politicians like Mike Bragman and Dave Townsend. Claudia Tenney (like the others, a former New York State Assembly member) helped us, too.”

Major successes for OLA, Colasante said, were getting the upgraded hatchery online in 1993 – then-OLA President Bob Ripberger was a major force in the effort – the construction and upgrading of boat launches and maintaining a strong relationship with the DEC.

“When we needed to get things done, we did a huge amount of heavy lifting,” he said. “There was tireless effort by the members, a group of people who were willing to work to protect and enhance the recreational qualities of the lake.”

OLA also has benefitted from a good



John Forney, right, was the founding director of the Cornell University Biological Field Station at Shackleton Point on Oneida Lake.



John Forney, founding director of the Cornell Biological Field Station at Shackleton Point, patrols Oneida Lake.

relationship with the Cornell University Biological Field Station at Shackleton Point, which was established in 1956.

Headed first by John Forney – who will be inducted into the New York State Outdoorsmen Hall of Fame this year – then by Ed Mills, and now by Lars Rudstam – the field station’s work has made Oneida one of the best-studied lakes in the world. Those studies have resulted in a number of strategies designed to enhance the health of the lake’s fish and wildlife.

The battle, however, is never over. Invasive species like zebra mussels, spiny water fleas and round gobies continue to be

problems. Siltation from inflowing creeks is another concern, along with warming water temperatures, invasive vegetation, and aging infrastructure, such as the canal wall at Sylvan Beach.

Still, Buffa says, the lake remains a tremendous asset, and he is especially heartened by the recent announcement that the adult walleye population has hit 1 million for the first time in decades.

He called it a bonanza, one that will only deepen his love for the lake.

“There is no better walleye fishing than Oneida Lake,” he said. “We’re rather blessed.” **A**