

The Lure of Conneaut Lake

Kids love pizza. I was a teenager before I had my first bite. Except for spaghetti, Italian food never crossed the threshold of our Irish home. To taste pizza, I had to travel 90 miles north of Pittsburgh to Conneaut Lake Park. Pizza did not draw me to the park. Conneaut Lake did that.

My cousins disappeared to Conneaut Lake each summer. Uncle Raleigh's family had built a cottage on Shady Avenue in the 1920's. It stood at the edge of a plateau, just before the tree lined lane slanted down to the lake. Screens encased the front porch that spanned the width of the two-story cottage. The screens admitted gentle breezes that cooled the warm summer days.

Shady Avenue ended at a large dock that extended out 100 feet into the lake. Imported sand covered the surface, providing a favorite spot for sun bathers. My two cousins, Alice Louise and Chrissy, had deep tans by midsummer, as did all their friends. Visitors from Pittsburgh, like myself, paled by comparison and spent many hours trying to darken their skins. My own efforts were always futile, so I spent many hours on that lovely porch avoiding the harsh rays of the sun.

The lake ever drew me from the porch. Limited swimming skills kept me close to the dock. My cousins could swim the half-mile across the

lake, but I was relegated to the safety boat that watched them do it. Uncle Raleigh had a motor boat that could pull water skiers; I rode in the boat, watching my cousins ski in case they fell into the water.

Learning to water ski was a major challenge. A life vest kept me afloat while I struggled with two large wooden skis. When the toe rope became taut, Uncle Raleigh gunned the motor, trying to pull me up. Most times I fell off to the side, swallowing large mouthfuls of lake water. After many efforts, I finally got up and proudly joined the ranks of water skiers.

A ferry boat plowed the lake waters, connecting the three cottage neighborhoods to the town center and the amusement park. Conneaut Lake Park had most of the rides that teenagers loved. Its star performer was the Blue Streak, a wooden roller coaster that combined speed with deep dips.

After a tumultuous ride on the Blue Streak, I was ready to walk down to the dock and catch the ferry back to Shady Avenue. While waiting for the ferry I had my first pizza - a fitting reward for the challenges of Conneaut Lake.