

Memories of My Summers at ‘The Lake’

By Denis Eble

For one week in July in the 1940’s & 1950’s my family and I would drive to ‘the lake’ and spend seven glorious days of our summer. Carefree, sun drenched days and hot and sleepy nights would drift by like the puffy clouds rolling overhead.

Clear Lake is only 90 miles from Toledo, but those were long miles for a boy anticipating a week of absolute freedom. We’d pack the car with more than we would ever need, and then, just before we left, my father would have to inspect the house one last time for unlocked windows, plugs still in the walls, and dripping faucets. Then we were off, straight down Central Avenue with only two traffic lights.

My sister and I knew all of the little towns by heart: Assumption, Oak Shade, Alvordton, and then, the mid-point, Fayette. This town had the only light from Secor Road to Clear Lake and my father always got it red and he always complained about it.

Mother would try to keep us occupied by having us count white horses or cows, or red barns along the way. No matter what the preoccupation, the drive seemed endless. Bean Creek, Twin Curves, St. Mary’s River, St. Joseph’s River twice, past the white Eskimo dog kennels and finally the fireworks store. That was our signal: right turn! Down Route 49 through Cooney and Camden then a left turns. Soon we’d see small lakes and we would say, “That’s it!” but of course it wasn’t. Then we would spot the church, St. Paul’s and we knew we were there. Sure enough, there it was: The Hazenhurst Hotel. We were there at last.



The Hazenhurst Hotel was a 3-story hotel which sat on the edge of aptly named Clear Lake in northeastern Indiana. The hotel was built at the turn of the century and was both common and refined. Our rooms were 301 and 303 at the end of a squeaky hallway that ended at a window with a rope which would act as a fire escape if necessary. Considering that the hotel was an old wooden structure and that there were numerous

smokers in the rooms we were lucky never to have used that escape method.

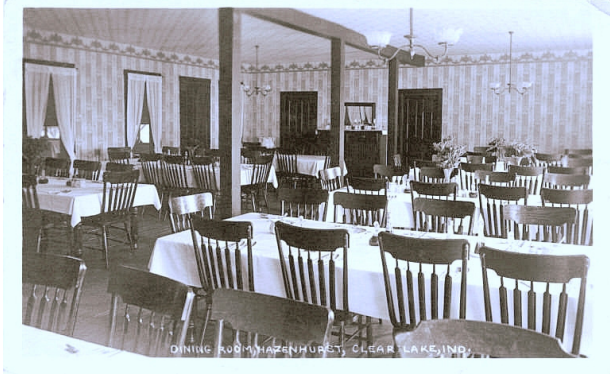
A singular light bulb illuminated two metal beds and a sink with rusty stains from iron laden 'lake water.' A transom above the door helped cool the room, but also let in the hallway noise and light. Bathrooms were at the opposite end of the hallway and were rather primitive and uninviting. My parents had the nicer room with two windows; one overlooked the lake while the other, as ours, looked down upon Ray Road. Much activity below our bedrooms often kept my father and sister awake, but I had no trouble sleeping through the noise and heat because my day had been filled with adventure.



I would be the first to awaken and would hurriedly dress and run to the edge of the lake to explore. Someone already had raked the beach of its debris and seaweed from the day before and the rental boats were neatly lined up upside down at the far end of the sandy beach. We never rented one of those boats and my sister

and I were content with an occasional boat ride from one of the Rouch boys. They would be in 101 and 103, first floor just off of the lobby. Those rooms had an outside entrance; very elegant and expensive, we were told.

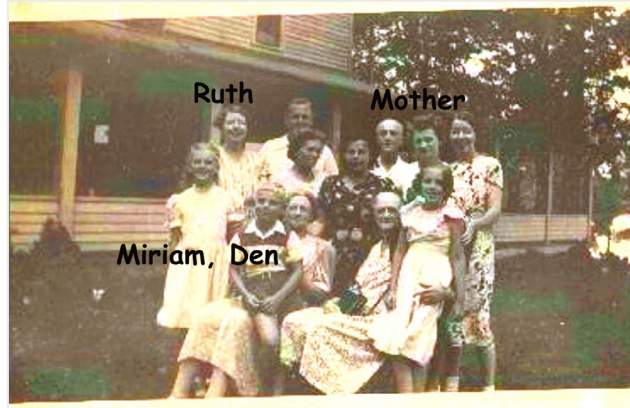
The morning lake would be calm and serene with tiny waves lapping the shore. The clarity of the lake would reveal thousands of minnows swimming just above the soft sandy bottom. In the far distance was 'the island.' A mysterious place, this island was always green and with no cottages, and it set my mind wondering with images of Indians or pirates or Huck Finn. Alas, throughout all of those summers I'd never set foot on that island.



The dinner bell would toll and I'd race towards the dining room, but I would never enter alone. The hotelkeeper's daughter, Grace, would be waiting for families to arrive so that she could seat them in the dining room. The dining room had a hardwood floor and many tables and the table and so we

always held our breath as we followed Grace, hoping for a prime location, near the window, of course. We also hoped for a friendly waitress as well.

The food was wonderful, from a kid's point of view, although some of the older guests would complain about the quality and quantity of food. Two guests with whom we would often share the week were two old maids from Cincinnati who would ride a Greyhound to the Hazenhurst. A red flag on the porch of the hotel would signal the driver to stop to pick up passengers. One of these ladies, I believe named Ruth, once said of one of the dinners, "I couldn't put a tooth to it!"



The Sunday afternoon dinner was the ultimate meal. Fried chicken with a special coating that I haven't tasted since, mashed potatoes with yellow gravy, corn, and homemade hot rolls were topped off with dessert of ice cream with dark chocolate sauce. No worry of fat grams or calories, just plain good food.

As we got older, our mother would demand strict eating manners, including my requirement of seating my sister at the table. I would always have to put on a clean shirt and dress pants for dinner. The wait for my parents to come down the steps into the lobby for dinner would seem endless. I was ready for food and after that, evening activities.

One of my favorites was flashlight tag. Several of the kids would hide behind the many tall oak trees and try to creep our way to the goal without being spotted by the flashlight. When I was older, I was allowed to go for an evening swim to cool off before the hot night in the room.

Another evening adventure would be at the bowling alley with duckpins and a small bowling ball. There were pinsetters to set and clear the pins and I wished I could do that job myself because it looked fun, exciting, and a bit dangerous.

Towards the end of the little town was the roller rink with the constant noise of music, clanging bells and roller skates. Since I could not skate, I just watched and wished I could be out there having fun like everyone else. My sister was a great skater and spent much time at the roller rink, but I was off to more adventures.



There was a general store between the bowling alley and the roller rink. I was interested in the candy, the pop, and boys' items like pocketknives and goggles and plastic boats. It would be strange to take a 99¢ item to the cashier and pay 99¢; at that time,

Indiana had no sales tax. Closer to the hotel, and built much later in our years there, was an open-air snack shop, the Coolie Hut. I loved the barbecue sandwiches and the chocolate malts and ate them with abandon. After all, there was no refrigerator to raid in the evenings.

The hotel lobby was an intriguing place. Early in the morning was the sound of vacuum cleaners and late in the night were the sound of room keys but always the sounds of conversations and the laughter of children. The pin ball machine would be clanging, the telephone



ringing, the screen door would be opening and closing and the massive wooden floor would be groaning. I became quite good at the pin ball game and once racked up more than 50 free games while playing it.

Behind the massive front desk were the innkeepers, Mr. & Mrs. Reed. He was a giant of a man dressed in coveralls and looked like a local farmer [in fact, he probably was.] Mrs. Reed was the much younger-looking, more serious and better-dressed businessperson of the hotel. I would put down my quarters on the massive desk and order a Bun Candy Bar or grape or orange Pokagon soda.

In the corner of the lobby to the right of the front desk stood a tall grayish-white piece of wood. On it someone had written a story of Chief Red Jacket who, in the story, was carried on this palette to his grave beneath the large stone in the front of the hotel. I never touched this wood for fear of receiving some bad spirit, but I revered this curio and looked for it each summer when we arrived. One summer, as I reached my teen years, it was gone, and I was too shy to ask where it had been taken. Secretly, though, I had hoped that some Indians had reclaimed it and had taken it back to their village.



Just off the lobby was a rectangular porch with just enough room for a Ping-Pong table. My sister and I would love to challenge each other and we would play game after game. Her advantage would be her height and age (14 months older) but mine would be my tenacity and quick reactions. We were evenly matched, as I recall, and had much fun playing together, occasionally squashing the ball as we stepped on it.

of horse imaginable to a 10 year old was here: the giant White Cloud, so tall that the rider would have to duck as it was ridden out of the barn; Imp, a white and black speckled mare, quite gentle despite her name; Thunder Cloud, Blackie, Fury- I've forgotten their names, but riding them brought us into another fantasy world.

However, across the street and down the dusty road, lay real adventure: Norton's Stables. Every kind



We were the cowboys that we heard on the radio programs and later TV shows. We were The Lone Ranger or Gene Autry, even though we would plod along horse after horse on a well-traveled trail through the woods. It was great fun. And when we finished the ride, we'd tell our parents how brave we were or what great



horsemen we had become. We'd smell of horses for hours afterwards and our city legs would be bowed out as we ambled back for a swim.

Swimming was the adventure. This crystal lake with its sandy bottom would go on for hundreds of yards, gently getting deeper and deeper. No drop off to worry about here, just yards and yards of



delightful sand and water. I liked swimming under the water probably because my above water swimming left something to be desired. However, before we could go into the water, we'd have to check with our parents to see that it was at least one hour since we had eaten because, it was said, we'd drop like a brick to the bottom if it was too soon.

No need in those days for sun block as skin cancer hadn't yet been discovered. We'd just burn and apply lotion or oil afterwards to cool the red skin. My parents would go for a swim for a short time, but would spend much

time on the beach talking to the other guests or to our relatives who would occasionally visit us. I would spend hours in and under the water,

sometimes with goggles so that I could find all of the treasures that lay hidden at the bottom of the lake.



So passed day after sun-filled day. This was the only week which my father took off from his work at The Ohio & Michigan Paper Company. If he took another week off, he said, his accounting work would pile up because there was no one to do it in his absence. So, he really enjoyed these fleeting days at the Hazenhurst and he packed in as much relaxation, recreation and enjoyment that he could. There was always a game of shuffleboard or an after breakfast walk along Ray Road to pick wild flowers. In

the evenings my parents would play cards or, once a week, drive to Fremont to have a beer! Putt-putt golf or a ride around the lake would be other adventures that our family enjoyed during this magical week.

Sunday was our last day and it was sad because the enchanting week was at an end. After breakfast we would attend Mass at St. Paul's and then we would have to pack up so that we could leave after lunch. It was hard for my sister and me to leave but we never knew at that



time how hard it was for our father to leave. He had 51 more days of working before his next break; we had the rest of the summer.

One summer my sister and I returned to Clear Lake for a second visit in August. We talked our parents into taking a bus to the Hazenhurst and staying for a few days and then our parents picked us up on the weekend. To me it didn't seem like the same magical experience that I had remembered. In fact things were changing.

We stopped going to the Hazenhurst when we got to high school. Perhaps we were too grown up to go or perhaps we had other activities that occupied our summer days. Yet the summer before my senior year my parents and I decided to return for a few days. At this time my sister had entered the convent, so it was just the three of us.

As we drove past St. Paul's Church, this time we didn't see the skating rink, or the general store, or the bowling alley. Our little summer town was gone. So were rooms 301 and 303. They were not using the third floor of the hotel any more and the dining room was now a restaurant. There were just a handful of guests at the hotel and there were new owners. Many things had been changed or rearranged; only the lake, the beach, and the trees escaped the transition.

Sadly, we stayed only two days and decided that this was not the Hazenhurst that we carried in our memories. As we headed down the dusty road this time we knew that we'd never return to that grand place of the 1940's and 1950's. The Hazenhurst would lie only in our memories.



I have returned to the site of The Hazenhurst Hotel a few times in my adult years. One time I visited the Angola Library and discovered that in April of 1969 there was a public auction of all of the furnishings and equipment of the old hotel. Shortly after that the grand old hotel was torn down. Condominiums now stand on the site, but the large trees, the hill, the beach wall with its many colorful boulders, and of course the lake remain. Several summers ago I decided to walk in the lake once more. As I waded into the water my thoughts returned to those happy summer days of long ago. I pictured my family and myself swimming here and could almost hear the sounds of the motor boats, the laughing children, and the dinner bell. As I left the water I looked up the hill to where the hotel once stood I thought again of the grand porch, the shuffleboard games, the horses riding by, and my parents waving me in. I turned one last time towards the lake before going back to my car and there, a little to the left on the horizon, was the dark green spot: the island. And maybe, just maybe one day I'll get into a boat and row to that island before I'm just a memory too.

EPILOGUE

Since writing this narrative several years ago, my sister, Miriam, has died. She developed an inoperable brain tumor in early 2005 and died in October 2006.

During the summer of 2005, after her many weeks of radiation and chemotherapy, I suggested that the two of us go back to Clear Lake just for old time's sake. I helped her walk down the hill to the beach where we let the sand sift between our toes. We waded out from the shore as we took in all of the memories that this magical place held for us as children.



Before leaving, I scooped up some of that sand and a few shells and put them in a bag. When we got back to the infirmary where she was staying, we split the treasure into two parts, one for her, one for me.

As Miriam lay in a coma in early October for 10 days, I sprinkled a few grains of Clear Lake sand onto her motionless hand and told her what I had done. She moved one foot, indicating that she understood. I kept

a small jar of the sand near her bed and would refresh the sand each time she was turned by the nurses.

At the closing of her coffin, I placed a small bag of the sand and shells with her, to take on her eternal journey. Good memories are contained in these small grains and perhaps it is a small glimpse of what heaven is all about.