

Virtually of my memories of growing up on the southern shores of Lake Erie are rich. Oh yes, some of them are of earned punishment received for various indiscretions---one might even term them “bad behavior “---but the long-term effects of even these, in retrospect, have been salubrious.

A word about the geography. Lake Erie is the oldest, albeit at 62 feet deep the shallowest of the Great Lakes, the five of which by combined surface area form the largest contiguous body of fresh water in the world. As a frame of reference, the 94,500 square miles of the Great Lakes are larger than all of the contiguous land masses of the United Kingdom. Erie is the shallowest of the Great Lakes, having reached its current maximum depth of 62 feet about 10,000 years ago. The lakes drain west to east, emptying into the Atlantic Ocean. They are heavily used for commerce, recreational swimming, boating, and especially when I was a young man, water skiing. One of the most important gifts my father gave me was an outboard motor lapstrake

boat. We water skied by the hour on the lake. It was perfect for all forms of fresh water activities. But perhaps most importantly, the lakes have supplied and still supply water for large parts of the Midwest. Unfortunately, unless current rates of pollution of the lakes are controlled, it is predicted that by the end of the 21st century the usability of the lakes for recreational purposes will have deteriorated significantly. Our country will have lost an irreplaceable asset as a source of both commerce and recreation for many people.

Cedar Fair, known for over a century as Cedar Point, the peninsula on which I was raised, is a seven and three-quarter mile sandy strip shaped somewhat like an incandescent light bulb with an elongated stem. On the bulbous end of the bulb, so to speak, is the resort known when I was growing up as Cedar Point. As children, we called it "The Point." It is one of the largest and most popular fresh water resorts in the world, second only to Coney Island. Its popularity is in part due to the extensive fine sand of its beaches. And of course the beautiful

water of Lake Erie, some of which are said to be home to every fresh water activity known...from swimming to water skiing and fishing to water boarding. Or simply playing in the sand at its edge---making sand castles, forts, or whatever magical structures caught the builders' fancy.

But the waters of the Lake Erie were not always pristine. During World War II, the Trojan Powder Plant near Sandusky discharged its waste into the rivers and streams emptying in to Sandusky Bay and thus Lake Erie. I am not sure of the composition of the waste; it was odorless but was a deep red to brown that changed the previously clear colorless water of the Bay and Lake. It also increased the levels of the lakes and bays. Despite the horrors of WW-II, when it was over and the powder plants closed, the waters gradually cleared, went down, and became pristine sources for wildlife and recreation once again.

But of course, at the park there were the core attractions of the commercial amusements---roller coasters, Ferris wheels, various games

played with balls and many other activities, the names of most of which I can no longer recall, or perhaps never knew. People by the thousands both played the games and rode the rides, often waiting in long lines for their turns, sometimes for hours. I remember vividly the wonders of the soaring scaffolding that supported the roller coasters. To our young eyes these complex beam systems seemed endless and truly wondrous---as did the roar of the roller coaster cars. On the ground near the nadir of the tracks where the cars passed at essentially full speed, the roar of their passing both overwhelmed and thrilled any bystanders, regardless of age. But especially the very young. It was truly a wonder in our eyes. And the wheels of these cars pressed countless pennies. We would put them on the tracks and they would be flattened by the trains to paper-thin discs the diameter of a quarter. These pressed pennies were highly prized; the kind of trivia and junk that thrill boys and girls of all ages.

But of all the events at the resort, as teenagers and college students we were most enthralled by the appearances of the big bands. Right after WW-II, before television was starting to become popular and had not yet dominated our entertainment habits, the so called "big bands" toured many of the large dance halls in the nation's major amusement parks. Cedar Point was one of those parks so these events were readily available to us. The ballroom was huge and the crowds were fed by passenger ships from Cleveland and Detroit, both just across Lake Erie. And the crowds were enthusiastic; and large. Bands like Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, Harry James---to mention a few which probably mean little to current readers---played so-called "one night stands," which were just what that name suggests. They would play in a venue for one or, at most, two nights, and would play pieces that had become popular through exposure of their bands on the radio. I remember well the family gathering in the living room around a floor-model console radio (remember them?) listening to these classic bands. But, to hear them live was special. They would

perform at huge dance halls, and as many people crowded around the stage as danced in the ballroom. It was an opportunity for young ladies to show off their newest dresses---and they did. And it was one of the rare times that young men sported jackets and ties---and they did. In many ways these were the best of times and they created some of the most cherished memories of my youth.

In years long past, the Civil War brought unexpected activity to Cedar Point. The Federal Government built a military prison on Johnson's Island in Sandusky Bay to house captured southern soldiers. Its remnants still stand today, unoccupied, but frequently toured. The prison was designed to incarcerate 2,500 Confederate soldiers captured in battle and was in full operation by 1863. When an actual unsuccessful attempt to free prisoners occurred in 1864, a ten-gun fortification was installed on the island. Cedar Point, including the cannon emplacements, also guarded Johnson's island, a favorite destination during tours of Sandusky Bay, especially for military buffs

and young boys. Because Cedar Point protected the entrance into the bay, it was an ideal location to install these defensive emplacements.

The amusement park itself opened in 1870, making it the second oldest such park in the in the United States, only Coney Island being older. It originally was owned and operated by the State of Connecticut, having been purchased shortly after the Revolutionary War. The lighthouse that marked the end of the jetty and of the peninsula was built in 1834 and is still in use today. It guides the shipping into a natural harbor entrance formed by Cedar Point on the East and the peninsula of Port Clinton on the West. On the western end of the Cedar Point peninsula is the resort of the same name. It is well known for its hotel---The Breakers---with accommodations for over one thousand patrons. From 1905 until the 1920's, the years known as the "Golden Age of Cedar Point," the resort thrived. It is said to have hosted 1,000,000 people for the first time in the 1913. It even had its own post office branch, the only other one in a resort was at Coney

Island. In 1957 a Causeway was built from somewhat east of the town of Sandusky directly into the amusement park. The Lakefront road, used for decades as an auto access to the resort, as well as the primary road to the lakefront homes, fell into disuse except by those whose homes faced the lake. Also falling into disuse were the steamers that brought clients from Cleveland, Detroit and Toledo. We applauded the opening of the "Causeway" running from just east of Sandusky to the resort proper. The road that ran between our family home and the lake, for years the only auto access to the amusement park, was no longer bumper-to-bumper on holidays, or any other time. The Causeway came as a true relief on days like the 4th of July when we actually had difficulty getting across the street to get from our home to the beach on the other side in order to go swimming in the lake. And when the waters around Cedar Point were declared by the Supreme Court to be in the public domain, many, many people came to swim in the lake and enjoy its many benefits.

But, I guess of all the memories, those of sailing remain the richest. Sandusky Bay offers some of the finest small boat sailing in the world. The winds are brisk and come from various directions, yet the waters are not unduly rough, the bay being protected by peninsulas on two sides. On Wednesday evenings and Sunday mornings, the bay became alive with virtually every type of small sailboat known---from catboats to sloop-rigged craft. A catboat has a forward mast from which a single sail is rigged backward toward the stern. A sloop rigged boat has, in addition, a smaller sail, called a "jib" rigged forward and attached to the mast and very bow of the craft. This sail has a variety of uses to adjust to winds from various directions, as well as provide wind power. When all is said and done, sloop rigging is common for many small recreational sailboats.

But on race days the bay was always crowded. And, I use the term "crowded" advisedly. The rules of the sea came into play not infrequently. And virtually everyone knew and followed them---well

almost everyone. Sailors were seldom shy about informing other sailors of real, or in some cases an imagined, infraction---at times in rather strong language phrased in sometimes vulgar terms. But, however emphatic the corrections, they were usually, delivered, albeit grudgingly, with the civility that befits the sport or followed by an apology that was at best strained.

Most of the sailboat owners who race carry an assistant, or “crew” of at least one person in addition to themselves. As a teenager, I frequently “crewed” in this role. As such, one has little to worry about except serving as ballast when tacking (sailing at an angle to progress into or across the wind). But, if you are lucky enough to have a skilled and willing skipper, as a crew member, one can learn from them both the basics and finer points of racing a sailboat. And, there is more to it than meets the eye. It is much more complex than simply sailing from a starting line to a finish line. The course you set as well as how you space and time your tacking, for example, often determines the winner.

There is also a bit of luck with the whims of the wind which are unpredictable. But in no small part, the skills of a sailor reflect how he or she senses these whims.

But as important as sailing was to me as a young lad, the marsh on the south side of the Cedar Point peninsula was where much of my time was spent. My father gave me a duck skiff when I was old enough to swim safely and learn the ways of the marsh. These areas, which lay behind our home, were shallow stretches of water with a saturated mud on the bottom, which was so slimy that it was referred as “muck.” All types of marsh grasses, reeds, water lilies and growths whose names I am not sure I ever knew, were rooted in, or supported by it. This muck would not support the weight of a person and the marshes were dangerous places for the inexperienced. If one just stands in muck, he or she would slowly sink into it. More than one inexperienced explorer has drowned in the muck by not understanding its dangers. We were taught as young boys to respect its treachery.

Scattered in the marshes were muskrat houses in which these amphibians dwelled. They were houses made of the marsh reeds woven by the muskrats and their domed roofs could easily be seen among the marsh grasses. The entrances to these homes were underwater and we could never see them actually entering or leaving. We were taught not to meddle with these houses because they were the homes to the muskrats.

They were trapped by many of us as young boys because they were fairly easy prey and their pelts were saleable to fur traders. Their meat was essentially of no value. I am not sure we received fair prices for the fur, but at the time it seemed like a lot of money to young teenagers.

Other inhabitants of the marshy waters behind our home was a variety of fishes, one of which we called "carp." These fish belong to a family to which minnows and goldfish also belong. As with those fish, they are of no value as a meat for human consumption. They can grow

to an advanced age (for a fish) becoming as large as 40 pounds and up to four feet or more in length. Their color ranges from a dull grey-brown to the bright gold that is familiar to all of us who have had the ubiquitous gold-fish as a pet when we were a child. We used to spear these carp for sport in the shallow parts of the lagoons fed by Lake Erie. We would then dig deep narrow holes around newly planted trees and bury the fish in the holes as fertilizer. For this purpose they worked very well and the trees flourished, but of course the fish did not.

But most memorable were the weeping willows that lined the man-made causeway from the main highway between Cleveland and Toledo as well as Cedar Point itself. The resulting lake-front road created a most picturesque entrance as an introduction to the peninsula and the resort it led to. With a lake on the right and luscious marshes on the left, the lake front road was truly spectacular. And almost every day we would see flights of geese and ducks, often flying

in their classic “V” formation and characteristically honking. We were lucky indeed to have grown up on such a road.

As a young boy, the large freighters traversing the lake were also a never ending source of wonder, especially the very long coal freighters. We could see them from our front porch as they carried coal that had been shipped by train from the fields of Pennsylvania and West Virginia to factories of the Midwest. The loading of the freighters was viewed by us as small boys as a wonder of the world. My father would park a car in view of the loading docks and we would be entranced by the processes. Huge loading equipment lifted an entire rail car filled with coal and turning it upside down, emptying the coal into the freighter. They started filling one end of the ship and, after it was partially filled, moved to the other end. This process was repeated until the freighter was filled to its center, at times by the contents of the better part of an entire coal train with sometimes also coal from another as well.

Cedar Point started in 1870 as a small bath house built along the shores of Lake Erie, when no one could have imagined that it would evolve into one of the largest and best known amusement parks in the world. But, soon it became known as “The Queen of American Watering Places.” Its most notable addition was built in 1918, when an enormous roller coaster termed the “Leap Frog Railway” was constructed. It was billed as the largest scenic railway in America and contained 100,000 board feet of new lumber. The initial drop was over seventy feet and prompted screams of terror from its riders as cars roared down it. By late 1918, Cedar Point had grown enormously and over 20,000 fun seekers flooded the park on the 4th of July that year. The Supreme Court of Ohio had held in 1878 held that the waters around Cedar Point were in the public domain, which made them freely accessible to the general public. And to this day, many of the beaches are used by the public for recreation and swimming. In the early days, the resorts were prim and proper. As one observer noted, Cedar Point was the ideal resort “...because the aged or infirm, or those with

moderate purses can enjoy the bathing, sailing, fishing and sociability of this near delight.” However, mixed bathing when the men and women intermingled made some swimmers uneasy in these years and screens were erected to separate the sexes. The ladies could thus bathe in privacy, as did the men, but the latter probably cared very little about their privacy.

But the crown jewel of the early years, and perhaps of the history of Cedar Point, came in 1905 with the building of the magnificent Breakers Hotel on the shores of Lake Erie. At the time, it was described as the “largest and greatest hotel on the Great Lakes.” Later, companies would be formed to generate electricity at the Cedar Point powerhouses. Among many uses this electricity was needed by the motors driving the rides and the sound equipment of the entertainers.

And some of these entertainments were major happenings. John Phillip Sousa, whose band was booked at the Hotel Breakers, created one of the landmark events of the season. The immense ballroom

which could accommodate hundreds of dancers, or in the case of the Sousa bands, often simply listeners, was packed to capacity during his performances.

Each June, Sousa also made it a point to take part in the annual trap shooting competition. In trap shooting, a clay pigeon is thrown by the “trap” at random heights and angles away from the shooter. These trap shoots were major events in our lives when I was a small boy. My father was a highly skilled shotgun shooter. One of the marks of such a shooter is the number of times he or she has broken 100 clay pigeons in a row, or “100 straight,” in the shooters’ jargon. My father had a drawer full of “100-straight” patches, but few were ever sewn onto his shooting jackets. He simply did not seem to care about them although I am sure he felt a lot of unspoken pride.

Late in my teens, I set the targets for many trap shooting competitions. In those days, setting trap involved placing the target clay pigeon on the mechanical arm of a machine that then threw them

away from the shooters. The machine could throw the pigeon at many different angles and heights based on a selection wheel. The wheel selected the angle and height at random and the shooter did not know how high or exactly where the pigeon would be thrown. These variables were, of course, at the heart of the sport. For most competitors a low pigeon thrown sharply to the left or right made the most difficult target to hit.

Many of the guns used for this sport are intended specifically for it. My father's was an Ithaca, a highly prized single-shot shotgun made exclusively for trap shooting. It hangs in our home today and serves as a memory of the wonderful times as a boy and young man that I had shooting trap with my father. Neither of our adult sons has shown interest in shooting. I believe it is a sport whose popularity has waned significantly. Certainly mine has---or perhaps a better adverb is completely.

But even in 1915, at Cedar Point there were always

alternatives to shooting---one was playing checkers. At the Point this game was played on a huge checkerboard with individual squares about one foot across. The chessmen stood about three feet tall. Although their environments are significantly different and they are different games, chess and checkers were both popular sports in the early part of the 20th century. Although I am sure they are still played on walk-on checkerboards in the parks of some communities, their popularity seems to have waned---and sadly, I am not sure what has replaced it.

But oh how that part of the Cedar Point peninsula where my boyhood home was located has changed. Gone are the marshes with their water lilies, ducks, geese, and fish jumping for no apparent purpose other than to engulf some unseen insect. It is especially sad that the geese are gone. They passed overhead on their way South, or North, depending on the time of year. They passed in great "V"s and their signature honking could be heard for miles.

But not all is lost. Now the beeches house condominiums that overlook the lake and bay. And the beeches, as we knew them are gone. The lake is constrained by extensive concrete walls and where the beeches at the edge of the lake were are essentially field stone that is called by locals “rip rap.” It is effective in containing the lake, but such a change. The great sand beeches on the Cedar point are merely distant memories, however wonderful they may have been when we were young and romped on them. One can only be wistful.