



# Our Times

Volume 4 Issue 2

THE PEOPLE, HISTORY, AND CULTURE OF LOGAN COUNTY, ILLINOIS

Summer 1999

## Water Works

### Fun at "The Lakes"

Every year, at Learn to Swim Week, John R. Parker would "oil his body with suntan lotion, go out and flounder around in the water, and pretend to drown," remembers Ruth Groff Goebel Aldendifer. Then an eager young person who wanted to earn his junior or senior lifesaving would have to do a flat dive off the boardwalk and swim out to save him.

"We practically drowned," declares Ruth. "He was bald, so he had no hair to pull him by. And he was chubby. We had to use the cross-chest hold to take him in. If we could save him, we could save anybody," she laughs.

Ruth is one of countless Logan County residents who remember Learn to Swim Week; instructors like "Tooky" Parker, Tom Alvey, Sherman Heinzl, Dolly Fullerton, Jack Kenning, and Maxine Werschey; and fun at Lincoln Lakes.

The lake resort was the fruition of a dream that was born when The Lincoln Sand and Gravel Company (LS&G) began dredging the swampy bottoms of Salt Creek in 1905.



Swimmers at Lincoln Lakes beach, 1953. Courtesy of Bob Orr, Lincoln Sand and Gravel.

When the sand and gravel were extracted, they would leave "a fine lake for fishing and boating and ice cutting," remarked *The Lincoln Times-Courier* on May 11, 1906.

Sure enough, in March of 1908, the *Times-Courier* reported that the banks of the ponds by the gravel pits were often lined with men and boys fishing for perch or mud cat. Stocked by the overflow of Salt Creek in the spring, the little lakes were beginning to live up to their promise.

Swimming soon caught on as well. In August of 1909, the *Times-Courier* reported that riders on the interurban were startled to see naked boys and men swimming in the gravel pits. If they couldn't stay under the water long enough for the cars to pass, concluded the writer, perhaps they'd better start wearing bathing suits.

Spring-fed and filtered through gravel, the chain of crystal-clear, cold lakes became very popular over the years, with boaters and swimmers moving from one lake to the next.

By 1928, when LS&G built a gravel road from the foot of Kickapoo Street out to the lakes, the former gravel pits covered almost 110 acres. The sand and gravel company had planted trees

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## Publisher's Notes

When folks gather in the waning days of summer, they swap stories of the season's adventures. My family moved to Lincoln late in August of 1972, and the stories we heard were of the wonders of The Lakes. It seemed that everyone had been to Lincoln Lakes that summer—swimming, fishing, picnicking. Lincoln Lakes was a center of community activity in Logan County, we learned, a magical place where little girls dipped dainty toes in cold water; boys dug moats around sandcastles; teenagers giggled and flirted in new swimsuits; and codgers drifted sleepily in rowboats, plumping for lunkers. Summers at The Lakes were recounted with glee long into the shortening days of autumn.

In early spring it started again, Lincolniters happily anticipating weekend escapes to The Lakes. Everyone was talking about it. Getting ready. I, too, was caught up in the spirit of the thing, even though I had never seen The Lakes. So on a chilly, wet Saturday in April, we packed the kids in the car and drove south of town on Kickapoo Street to

get our first glimpse of the beach. I felt an obligation to love this place that all of Lincoln loved, but my feelings were mixed. I remembered Lake Bloomington in the mid-1950s: my two younger brothers and I walking with our aunt to the schoolyard in Towanda (Mom was home with another baby brother), meeting with other kids and moms and aunts and big sisters at an assigned time, piling into cars, and going to the public beach for the day. We carried sack lunches, and when we finished eating, Aunt Beth tapped her Timex with her finger and gave us a stern look, reminding us to stay out of the water for 30 minutes.

I loved to swim, but the dark lake water was a source of anxiety. Being the big brother and a consummate worrywart, I constantly scanned the lake's surface for two familiar heads bobbing above the waves. If for a second I could not see one of my brothers, I froze in a moment of private terror. Inevitably, the missing head bobbed up again, its owner oblivious to my concern. Then I enjoyed myself for a couple of minutes until the thought struck me again of just how easily some small person could slip out of sight.

On a hot July afternoon in 1973, our first full summer in Lincoln, a boy slipped out of sight at Lincoln Lakes and drowned. The decades of The Lakes as a gathering place for the community shortly came to an end. The great Lincoln tradition of fun for the masses at The Lakes was over. Of course, we have other places to swim, but not many other places to gather. At least not for all of us to gather. I heard recently that Wal-Mart is now the center of our community; everybody goes there. Wal-Mart is a safe place; I like that. But shopping sorties are not the stuff of summer stories, gleefully retold in autumn, stories set in the common experience of a *good* place. SR

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and cooperated in stocking the lakes with fish. With LS&G issuing as many as 1,600 free fishing permits per year, fishing parties from Decatur, Bloomington, Springfield, St. Louis, and Chicago joined local enthusiasts in hooking everything from bass and crappie to catfish to the occasional pike.

With the beginning of the Lower Salt Creek Drainage District's proj-

ect to minimize flooding by deepening and straightening Salt Creek, the timing seemed right for creating a lake resort.

So in 1929, V. O. Johnston, president of LS&G, announced that Lincoln Lakes would be developed as a recreational center. "Lincoln's dream of many hopeful years—for lake facilities—will be realized . . ." exulted the *Lincoln Evening Courier*, on March 7, 1929.

By August 5<sup>th</sup>, a sandy beach and temporary dressing rooms had been built, Eagle Scout Lewis McVicker had been signed up as instructor of the swimming classes, and the first Learn to Swim Week was under way.

Run by the Logan County chapter of the American Red Cross and the Boy Scouts, Learn to Swim Week was so successful that it was an annual event for decades. Despite rain and cool weather, about 300 men, women, and children took lessons that first year. One hundred and five people swam their way to their beginner's and swimmer's buttons. Twenty-four more earned the right to sew the Red Cross emblem on their bathing suits by passing the rigorous lifesaving exams.

With all the new swimmers, Mr. Johnston announced that the dressing rooms would be kept open, two "life savers" would be on duty, and swimmers would be charged ten cents a visit.

In July of 1931, the permanent beach was opened, complete with a bathhouse with thirty-two dressing booths and two showers, a concession stand, a corps of lifeguards, and floodlights.

The first water carnival took place on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1932, and included canoe tilting (pushing over your opponents' canoes); a free-for-all where swimmers tried to keep each other from completing a specified course; and canoe, sailboat, and swimming races—all before a crowd of 1,500 people. All attendance records were broken during a heat wave

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that month, when between 1,500 and 2,000 people from all over Central Illinois swam at the beach.

In 1934, Herbert Beach leased an acre of land from LS&G so that he could move in a cottage from the Chautauqua grounds. It would be the first privately owned cottage at the Lakes and the beginning of a summer colony on their banks. (Some fifty years later, the last LS&G lease would be signed by Chuck and Elaine Lindstrom, who would build their log house on one of the back lakes.)

Throughout the forties and fifties, the Lakes continued to be a playground for Central Illinois residents. But as floods and agricultural runoff led to cloudier water, swimmers became enamored of the clear waters of the Lincoln Recreation Department's new swimming pool on Primm Road and the Elks pool near Memorial Park, and attendance at the Lakes fell.

The closing of the beach may have been precipitated by the death of eleven-year-old James Smith, who drowned July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1973, when he was struck by another child who had jumped from the high tower. Although a lawsuit filed by Smith's father against the father of the other child and Mason House (doing business as Lincoln Lakes Recreational Area) was dismissed in February of 1975, a perusal of subsequent issues of the *Courier* reveals an advertisement for boating and fishing—but none for the beach.

Concerned that outside developers might take over the Lakes, residents Gene Burwell and Perry Luckhart negotiated the purchase of the property (from Walter Spatz and a group of widely scattered owners) by a group of residents at the Lakes. Homeowners bought their individual lots from the Lincoln Lakes Condo Association in 1984.

*"There is nothing . . . half so much worth doing as simply*

## Messing About in Boats"

**M**oonlight canoeing on Lincoln Lakes—what a romantic idea! Morris Clouse and Herb Alexander thought so when they were young—and a (forbidden) swim with their dates once in a while just added to the evening. On the other hand, if they took their dates out in the afternoon, Mr. Johnston might invite them up to the porch of his houseboat for a glass of iced tea.



*It worked! Jen Bear [Alexander] in the late '40s. Courtesy H. Alexander.*

Canoeing has always been popular at the Lakes. In the forties, the Mariner Girl Scouts used to launch their canoes, paddle across the lake, portage a short distance to Salt Creek, and then paddle to the Middletown Bridge. Mrs. Charles Woods christened the Mariners' canoe "Gini" after their leader, Gini Webster [Higgins].

Earlier, canoeists like Herb Alexander (Kan-U-Go), Dave Hanger (O-LTR-B), Jim Coogan, and the Trapp boys stored their crafts in the locomotive shed at the end of the main road. Later, Doc Lund built a canoe shed from an old boxcar.

Sailing was fun. Some of the boaters put sails on their canoes. Les Dowling, from the casket factory,

sailed a large mahogany sailboat with John Parker.

Gini Higgins remembers Doc Lund's large sailboat (Kismet). Gini bought her first "dinghy-type" sailboat from Bill Dowling when she went to work after she finished school and sailed it until "it just literally fell apart," she says.

Many years later, she got to sail again—this time in the little wooden Sailfish J. Frank Fikuart had made. When J. Frank and Marta bought their fiberglass boat, "I talked them into selling me their wonderful wood boat. . . . I use it still," says Gini.

In the seventies, Gini was a member of the Kickapoo Valley Yacht and Canoe Club, which had its own boathouse, stationery, and burgees [little flags].

The little group of sailors—including J. Frank and Marta Fikuart, Tom Perry, Brewster Parker, Bill Bushell, Bud Petty, Doug Pokorski, Stu and Jeanette Wyneken, Gil Dalton, Rae Marie Gelsthorp, Rich Branom, and Gini—all lived in town and came out to the Lakes to sail.

Weekends, they set up a course according to the wind direction, shot off a cannon, and held races—weaving in and out of the duck buoys to win the traveling trophy: a six-inch-tall pepper shaker in the shape of a classic cup.

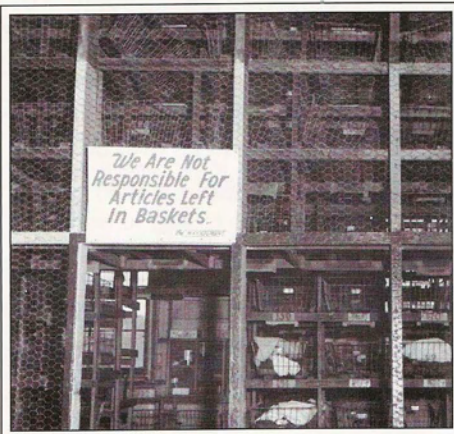
When the old boathouse became dilapidated, the club built a new one from telephone poles, used lumber, and barn siding. Club members and other non-resident boaters had to leave two years later, when the condo association took over. Today, pontoons are popular at the Lakes.

# Two Miles from Town

Ruth Aldendifer remembers that, “We used to go out [to the Lakes] every single day all summer long, and all of our friends did, too.”

“We would ride our bikes out, or sometimes somebody would have a car and enough gas to get us there,” says Ruth. “It was the Depression, so there was no money.”

A season ticket cost \$2.50, which some of the boys earned by scooping sand, pulling weeds, and the like. Teachers for Learn to Swim week, like Ruth, got in free—just that week.



*Basket room at Lincoln Lakes beach. Courtesy of Bob Orr.*

Ruth remembers showing her ticket at the bathhouse and taking a wire basket with handles to the ladies’ dressing room to change her clothes.

At one point, the girls heard that the basket boys had drilled holes in the wall between the basket room and the ladies’ dressing room. Once Ruth walked up to that wall, “doing a towel dance”—and suddenly spied a hole in the wall.

“I put my eye to the hole, and another eye was looking back!” says Ruth.

That’s when the girls knew the ru-

mors they had heard were true.

“We sure quit doing that, and they made them block them up,” she remembers. “But we were never positive again . . . so we behaved ourselves.”

Ruth’s future husband Bob was head lifeguard and examiner for the junior and senior lifesaving badges for a number of years. When their three sons were growing up, they used to ski around the lake at Fourth of July celebrations—Bob and Bruce forming a pyramid, with little Steve on their shoulders.

## Other Memories

Gini Webster Higgins remembers that the water at Lincoln Lakes was exceptional.

“There were springs that bubbled up from the bottom. As you swam along, it was so clear and so clean yet, and you could just feel those bubbly springs,” remembers Gini.

At Learn to Swim Week (which Gini ran for a couple of years before Becky Sargent took over) they started with the “poor cold, tiny little boys in the morning. We would all turn blue and shake and shiver,” remembers Gini.

Lots of people learned to swim; those who didn’t at least lost their fear of the water.

Gini’s troop of Mariner Girl Scouts always helped with Learn to Swim Week. One year they brought their sleeping bags and camped out on the big front porch of Mr. Johnston’s huge cabin.

Gini’s other memories include: white ribbed bath towels with “Lincoln Lakes” embroidered in navy blue . . . umbrellas planted in the

sand . . . a water slide “for the little guys” . . . a raft anchored in the shallow water . . . records played over the p.a. system . . . and hot gingerbread at the concession stand.

Elsie Komnick Menzel remembers that whenever a 99-year lease was signed, someone from LS&G would just come out and step off the lot; they weren’t very precise. That’s probably why Elsie’s father came out one day after World War II to find that someone had built the foundation for a house on his lot. He just took the lot next door.

Elsie laughs that she knows every nail in the house her family built on that lot. Her parents, their three grown children, and their families did all the work themselves, picnicking as they went.

“When they got ready to put on the clapboards, the men would cut a board, and my mother would sit at the picnic table and put on the base coat, and they would nail it up. So she actually put the first coat of paint on the house,” Elsie remembers.

Although Elsie says her family’s cottage has never been under water, she does remember several large floods. Often when residents saw the water rising, they would leave a car at the interlocking plant on the way out.

After the roads were covered with water, they could boat to that point, tie their boats to a fence post, and drive into town for supplies. Flooding seemed to bring out a certain camaraderie among the stranded. Since they were marooned, they might just as well play cards and have a good time.

Elsie says that flooding is less frequent since the building of the dam at Clinton and the sea wall in a field adjoining Salt Creek.

# ... but Another World

On both the front and back of the Parker cottage at Lincoln Lakes, there are two lights—one red and one green. Since the days of Lynn R. Parker, a red light has meant a closed party. A green light shining over the water or through the woods means an open party—everybody come.

The former Chautauqua cottage, with its paneled walls, enclosed porch, and stone fireplace, has seen its share of good times since it was moved there before World War II. Four generations of Parkers have hung out in the separate pine-paneled rumpus room, fished for the crappie that hid in the shade of the boat dock, and held wiener roasts in the fall.

Lynn Parker's great-grandson Jonathan remembers moving out to the Lakes every Memorial Day, Fourth of



Jonathan and Brewster Parker.  
Courtesy of Joan Parker.

July, and Labor Day holiday. That's where his dad, Brewster, taught him how to fish, and that's where his little cousin Sarah could catch crappies just by throwing a shiny hook off the dock.

Jonathan's best friend in elementary school was Mitch Brackney, whose grandparents, the James Heinzels, owned a cottage across the lake.

Whether it meant hitching a ride in a boat or using a rowboat or rubber raft, the two boys would always find some way to cross the lake to play together. In high school and college, Jonathan and his brother, Christopher, liked to swim out to the sand bar in "the dead middle" of the lake and lie in the sun.

Jonathan's grandfather John Parker used to lie in the sun with Rip, his Labrador retriever, at his side. "Papa" John had been involved in Learn to Swim Week, so he teasingly called Jonathan a landlubber until he learned how to swim.

Fishing was another Parker tradition Jonathan followed. For two summers, he spent mornings mowing lawns and "virtually every afternoon" fishing in a canoe with his high school pals Tracy Poole, Scott Kuhlman, and Mark Krusz.

Still, "My vision of the lake is with the colorful sailboats," he says, and the lake is where he learned to sail his father's little one-person Sunfish when he was in seventh grade.

Jonathan's happy memories include a twenty-first birthday party held at the cottage with his high school and college friends and his parents, Joan and Brewster.

Lynn Parker had named his cottage home *Roosevelt Point*, even putting up a sign. The 1940 Presidential election prompted his Republican friends to jokingly replace that sign with one that read *Willkie Point*. Whatever its name, the cottage has always been a magical place.

## Eric Burwell's Memories

Eric Burwell grew up at Lincoln Lakes. In those days, "we used to

have snow from Thanksgiving to Easter," he remembers. Those winters were good times for ice skating, playing hockey, and snowmobiling through the woods.

Spring brought mushroom hunting. Eric remembers searching all morning with Frank Yunker and finding nothing. "Then all of a sudden, we found the mother lode—30 in one spot," he says.

"We were always making a fort or something in the woods," Eric says—a place to "hang out" with his brother Curt and John Lindstrom.

Summer meant swimming. Eric remembers going to the public beach with his mother and brother when he was a little boy and coming home and watching *Gilligan's Island* and eating a Ho-Ho while Curt napped. When the boys were older and the beach had closed, Eric and Curt swam off their dock or at the ski beach.

Also with summer came biking, paddling the old 18-foot aluminum canoe, and water skiing. Eric began skiing at the age of six, his parents pulling him first on two skis and then on one until he and Curt were old enough to drive the boat themselves.

The Burwell boys did most of their fishing when they were small, catching crappie, blue gills, and carp from their own dock.

It wasn't lonely out there in the woods. Eric and Curt had friends their own ages who lived nearby: John and Charlie Lindstrom; Eric Chambers; and Lisa, Tina, and Terry Spooner. In high school, they spent a lot of time in inner tubes and canoes with Jonathan and Christopher Parker.

As Eric says, Lincoln Lakes is "two miles from town but another world."

## Sand and Gravel—and Flamingos!

# Lincoln Sand and Gravel

**D**uring the heat of summer, when the water at the Lincoln Lakes beach became too warm, Herman Clouse would take a dredge boat along the shore to stir it up and bring the cool spring water to the surface.

Keeping swimmers happy was all part of the job for Mr. Clouse, who served first as superintendent of The Lincoln Sand and Gravel Company plant, then as vice president of the Lincoln Lakes Company.

The Lakes were the result of an operation that has shipped out 25 million tons of sand and gravel since LS&G was incorporated on February 1, 1905.

The story began when W. C. Jones, an engineer for the Chicago and Alton Railroad, was sent from Ohio to find out why the piers along the track right-of-way south of Lincoln were unstable. While here, he noticed a fine deposit in the Salt Creek “bottoms,”

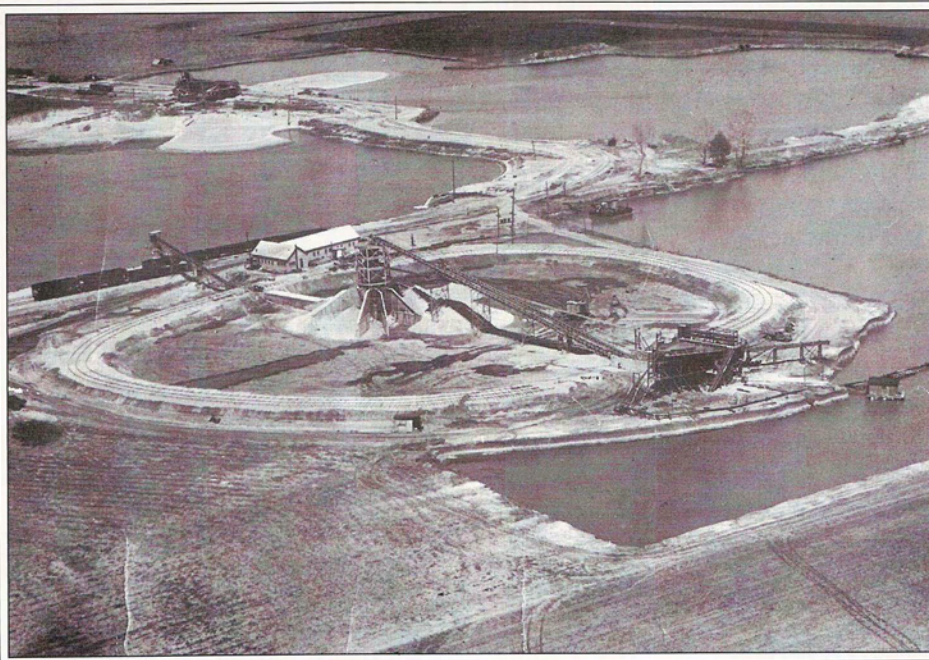
which he decided to develop.

Sample borings were made in the fall of 1904, and on January 28, 1905, LS&G bought 278 acres of land from Lincoln businessmen and land developers Frank Frorer and David H. Harts.

By October, the company had begun the process of plucking the sand and gravel from the swampy home of red-winged blackbirds and frogs, transplanting it into railroad cars, and sending it on its way.

V. O. Johnston, the son-in-law of founder W. C. Jones, was president of LS&G for many years.

J. David Neher, Johnston’s grandson, visited his grandparents in Lincoln as a child. He remembers staying at the Johnston home at 327 Tremont Street, walking with his grandfather alongside the lake, and being picked up and out of the way of a cottonmouth that was enjoying the shade next to their path.



*Mining sand and gravel—and incidentally creating lakes—in the days when sand and gravel traveled by rail. Courtesy of Bob Orr.*

For many years, LS&G shipped all its products by rail. Its own track ran from the gravel pits to the little interlocking plant, where LS&G locomotives delivered the railroad cars to the Illinois Central, C&A, and Illinois Traction System. The company’s motto was “One Car or a Train Load.”

In 1928, LS&G had a capacity of 75 cars per ten-hour day and could draw from 1,000 cars of various grades of sand and gravel it held in storage.

Over the years, some of those products traveled to South Kickapoo Street, where LS&G’s Roy Weaver and Walter Spatz had opened the Lincoln Concrete Products Company.

Since 1936, LS&G has been mining sand and gravel from land owned by Arthur M. Park and his heirs. Medusa Aggregates purchased the gravel plant and the leases on the Park land in 1974. Bob Orr and William Bruner bought LS&G in 1981; since 1992, the company has been owned by Bob and Judi Orr. Their son Rob and his wife, Kate, are active in the business.

The machinery has become more sophisticated, but the process is pretty much the same as it was in 1905: strip off the overburden (clay and topsoil); suck up the mixture of water, sand, and gravel; and run it through screens to separate it by size. Today, however, everything goes out by truck.

Bob Orr says that probably LS&G’s most unusual order has been for the special sand that flamingos stand in. The firm also has sent a baseball mix of sand and clay to the Chicago Cubs. Many Central Illinois golfers stride across greens treated with LS&G dressing sand (a mix of sand and peat) and try to swing their way out of traps filled with the company’s trap sand.

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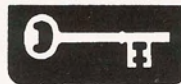
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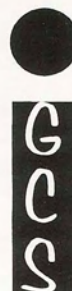
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Lincoln Lakes beach, 1954. Courtesy of Bob Orr, Lincoln Sand and Gravel.

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of Logan County, Illinois

### Inside This Issue

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Lincoln Sand and Gravel

Material for this issue came from the *Courier* under its various names, official papers of Lincoln Sand and Gravel, *History of Logan County Illinois 1982*, and the memories of our friends. Corrections: Harriet Graham Taylor says that the Nash owned by Lucile Richards was a sedan, and it was two shades of light green. The streetcar extension to the Chautauqua grounds was built in 1903, not 1907, as found in one source.

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