

April 2016

When asked to write about the social history of the pond, what it was to us who lived there, it's hard to know where to start.

If you ever lived beside a body of water you'll know how it comes to affect every part of life. Every time you look out the window or step out the door. Every walk you take. The colours and reflections. The effects of wind and sun. The rising and falling that changes with the seasons. The moon shining on it at night.

Some of my first memories are of the pond. This time of year (the damp cold spring) we'd be waiting for fishing season to start. I remember being put to bed in a room shared with my sisters, looking down out of the window into the dark and seeing the bonfires starting, like a group of gypsies had come to stay. In the morning light there they were, sprung up overnight, encamped and blanket-wrapped, our quiet haven surrounded by happy revelers who'd dropped their lines at midnight. My friends and I would tuck our pajamas into hooded sweatshirts and sleepily walk over to greet them. When we got older we'd spend the days beforehand digging worms in our vegetable gardens, or catching minnows at the base of the falls, a dime a cup. Although what sold better, we gradually discovered, were warm brownies made by our mothers.

The creek was a source of fun too, especially in spring when its banks swelled and the suckers tried to swim up against the current to spawn. We'd stand in water teeming with them, the river made of suckers, and catch them in our hands just to pull them out to see their vicious-looking mouths. Then there were the frogs, the shrieking so loud you could easily hear it with the windows closed, and what we called frog nights when every frog in every hole decided to sally out and find a mate, so many you couldn't walk for stepping on one, the ground not the ground anymore but an ocean of frogs.

As the hot days came the pond was for swimming. The big kids made diving boards with planks roped into the trees or across the rails of the bridge, their splashes and whoops echoing all day long. We smaller ones followed our mothers to the grassy banks back near the source where the water was shallow, and

where we learned to swim. We had picnics back there too; the United Church held its Sunday School picnics on the grass flats abutting the pond. The adults sat in lawn chairs watching our games. There'd be hot dogs and ice cream and orange drink, and after the sweet syrupy juice was gone and the sun gone down we'd catch fireflies in the Styrofoam cups, holding our hands over the mouth to make flashing white lanterns. In late summer the apple trees on the pond banks dropped masses of fruit and my brother started up a years-long competition by showing us how to whip them across the water with a homemade slingshot. That wasn't the only thing to cross the water; he took a dare to drive his snowmobile over the surface where the pond narrows, and all the villagers came out to see. He did it – once. The second time didn't go so well. It was a funny memory for years to come at community parties and family reunions held on those banks.

Hours and hours spent in the water, either in the pond or playing in the creek below. We learned to climb the cement slope of the falls, grabbing the long algae with our fingers and toes like monkeys. We'd spend the day soaked and go to bed at night wrinkled as prunes. So many adventures, like finding tadpoles or scurrying crabs that skittered under the river rocks, capturing snapping turtles that laid in wait for ankles to nip and returning them to the nearby swamp they'd strayed from. I learned to fish at the pond, as did so many other children. How to bait the hook, how to cast. We had a rowboat, and later several families, including ours, bought canoes. If you sat still you'd get to see the trout jump and flip and fall back with a splash. You can still see it any summer day. The pond is a peaceful spot on a late summer day in a canoe.

Back to school. But after school the grounds around the pond were the place to play and run. One neighbour told us that if you turned seven times under the biggest weeping willow, your wish would come true. I bet she enjoyed lots of afternoons watching us spin around until we fell down. Wildflowers and wild cucumbers were our playthings – that sounds whimsical but our favourite game was war. Two teams. The prickly cucumbers and golden rod stalks were our bombs and clubs – and those hits stung. It was always too bad though when the season started to change and the dark sent us home.

At Hallowe'en the pond was a source of pranks – it got drained on more than one Hallowe'en night. Our dads took it in hand; the neighbourhood always watched over the pond, moving the boards in the damn to raise or lower the water level as need be to prevent flooding. I always understood that draining it once in a while was good for the pond – maybe it killed off the weeds that sometimes grew up from the floor. When you live beside a pond you get to know when something is off, when something changes, because you see it every day. I remember my father feeling put out that the UTRCA would visit periodically and, to his way of looking at it, think they knew better what was best for the pond, more than the local folks did who kept the banks from overflowing by a daily monitoring of those boards in the dam.

Now we'd just be waiting for winter. We looked forward to skating almost more than swimming. The best years it froze hard before the snow came and we'd have the whole surface to glide on. One neighbour put himself in charge of safety and chopped holes to measure the ice. I remember him coming over to tell my mother we could go – and we were off. There were often two rinks operating, one for hockey and one for skating. Every day after school you'd just scramble to get your skates on. It was so cold putting them on at the rink we'd walk over with skate guards, the funny marks all up and down the road. If your skate guard got lost in the snow you'd crawl there if you had to. Saturdays we'd be there all day. The chill blains!! Ow! We'd regularly skate until we couldn't feel our feet, then the thawing was like being stabbed with a hundred tiny knives. But that never stopped us. We'd watch figure skating on TV and then get out there and try out our moves. And of course hockey. Hockey until dusk. Falling light, pink sky, and that eerie cracking sound, like the rip of lightning, that the ice makes as the temperature falls. Sometimes it sounded like cannons going off. Boom! That sent us home.

On more than one Christmas Day the ice was solid enough. At least twice I can remember the whole community came out to skate on Christmas Day. The kids would compare notes on what gifts we got and go home to turkey dinner.

I have one more memory to share. Back to spring and I woke to a perfect dewy Saturday morning, everything green from a big rain the night before. Hopped on my bike and rode along the side of the pond on the packed dirt trail. What did I see? A mother duck and eight babies – eight! – weaving through the reeds, then popping onto the water, one, two, three, fast as beads falling off a string, and paddling away. There were always these surprises, as the pond was home to so much more than its human inhabitants.

The pond was an integral part of the community when I was growing up. It was the place where we met and played and celebrated. I still visit regularly with friends and family, and it's still an idyllic spot for a quiet afternoon. I'd hate to think of it gone, not just for myself but for all the visitors I run into there, some from our former population, who like me look forward to our visits and to sharing memories.

I can see that re-habilitating the area, in whatever way is chosen, will be costly. But I say spend the money on keeping the pond rather than the alternative of removing it, which as far as I can see could turn out to be equally costly. And the systems of wildlife that have grown there over the years deserve our protection as well. This village doesn't have a draw without the pond, but with it, it has the possibility of tourism and a future. I'd like to think the social history of the Harrington Pond will be allowed to continue.

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