

Inner Tubes and Daylilies: Reflections on Indian Lake

By Christy Chafe

It is the crunch of the gravel under the tires that lets me know I have arrived. When I was little, I could feel it all through my body, stretched out in the “way back” of my family’s Buick Electra, in a giant fort of blankets and pillows, stuffed animals and duffel bags, in order to comfortably bear the 2-hour trek up I-71 and across several state routes from Madeira to Indian Lake. Now, when I arrive, I am in the front seat, but the same sound wakes me, as I have inevitably fallen asleep while my husband drives. A different trip now, driving south from Hudson, but the same arrival. Car doors fling open as my own children scramble out, freed from the confines of the mini-van. They are across the yard and onto the dock before I unfold my legs and gather my sunglasses and water bottle. I can already see the orange daylilies from my car window; daylilies just like the ones I have planted in my garden at home to remind me of this place. I am anxious to exit the van and see the Lake. It is summer. I have arrived.

Indian Lake is a 6,000 acre man-made lake located twenty miles south of Lima and fifty miles west of Columbus in Russells Point, OH. Fed by both the North and South Forks of the Upper Great Miami River, it is a vacation spot complete with bass tournaments, sailboat regattas, restaurants, a state park, rental cottages, beaches, and islands; yet, most people have never heard of my Lake. Perhaps this is why it has maintained its charm. With a sandy bottom and non-threatening depths, this is a friendly Lake with lapping shores, families of ducks, and a lily pond. I have been floating in the Lake every summer for nearly 40 years, and I still turn to the water for peace, and

occasionally for cleanliness, if there is Ivory soap floating nearby and time enough for a quick “Lake Bath.”

My parents met at Indian Lake in the summer of 1958. My dad, the blonde, suntanned lifeguard at Silver Isle beach, and my mother, the renter from a cottage down the lakefront, staying with her three sisters and mother, singer, Ruby Wright. I’ve heard the stories my whole life. My aunt, my mother’s older sister, was the first one who actually met my dad at the Lake, coming home to report back to my mother, “I’ve just met the man you’re going to marry.” The dates that followed were often in speedboats, or sometimes they danced at the Moonlight Terrace Gardens. I can imagine them skiing and swimming with friends and relatives, playing cards in the cottage kitchens, and floating in big, black inner tubes, hot from the summer sun. There were nights spent at the amusement park across the Lake, complete with a roller coaster, a Ferris wheel, and a boardwalk leading to Sandy Beach Island--all of which contributed to Indian Lake’s nickname, “Ohio’s Million Dollar Playground.”

Lifeguards grow up, marry summer renters, and have children. Since it was my great-grandfather who built the original cottage in 1919, my brothers and I became the fourth generation of my family to enjoy Indian Lake summers.

These summers of our childhood were spent visiting the Lake on weekends, rather than staying for weeks at a time, like the generation before. The amusement park was long shut down, after a damaging fire and series of riots starting July 4, 1961; the dancehall had seen its decline even earlier, in the 1950’s. But some things hadn’t changed at all. The Lakefront view was certainly the same as when my grandfather’s

family first broke ground on the original cottage. From the patio of my grandparents' home, you could see Turtle Shell Island, The Gap (a break in the opposite shorefront leading to "the big part of the Lake") and the always anticipated sunset. It is a sunset that still inspires my mother to take pictures nearly every night, certain that each is more beautiful than the one before. She is, quite possibly, right.

We would arrive for our Lake weekends, jump out of the car and run to the dock, ready to swim and already begging for our boat ride to Hinkle's Donuts. My father taught me to ski, my grandmother taught me to play Rack-O, and my grandfather taught me to love Limburger cheese, which he would serve from under a glass dome during cocktail hour. My grandparents' friends from neighboring cottages would come for cocktails and cheese in the late afternoon, and we grew to expect that there would always be friends and family on the patio. Summer evenings were spent outside listening to the Reds' broadcast on WLW, Joe Nuxhall and Marty Brennaman calling the game. My grandfather, my dad, and my brothers would lean in anxiously, cheering or swearing accordingly. While most people enjoy their baseball with hotdogs and beer, we enjoyed ours with bug spray and the sound of the water hitting the rocks.

There were fireflies to catch, burgers to flip, donut holes to throw at my brothers when they were skiing, and the same inner tubes for floating. No visit to the Lake was complete without a trip to The Ark for peanut butter pie and a boat ride past O'Connor's Landing (where we were once memorably stranded, boat, skis and all, during a terrible storm.) The Memorial Day party, the Fourth of July fireworks, and the Labor Day Ring of Fire (hundreds of orange flares shining around the twenty-six miles of Indian Lake

shoreline) were annual events, but the whiffleball games were nightly extravaganzas. All ages were invited; if you could hold a plastic yellow bat, you were on a team. Cheers rang out and drinks were lifted in celebration as players ran to first base (the air conditioning unit), second base (the third post on the fence), third base (the hand rail on the original cottage) and finally, home plate—a patch of dirt in the grass worn from years of use. Homeruns flew across the street and balls often splashed into the Lake. The games lasted long past dark, with the youngest teammates fiercely protesting against bedtime.

At night, my brothers and I would share one of the two upstairs bedrooms. The beds were soft and mushy; truly, one of my favorite places to sleep in the entire world. The overhead fan, the exceedingly giving mattress, and the red-and-white quilt all made for a lovely night's rest. There was one blanket in particular—a white one, soft and thin, covered in pink roses. It was trimmed with satin on its edges, and I could usually manage to claim it during our weekend stays. I would fall asleep counting the days that remained in our Lake vacation, always wishing there were more.

Indian Lake called us back, time and time again, and we were lucky enough to be able to answer.

Now that my brothers and I have families of our own, the Lake calls to us and our children in a way that I always knew it would. My parents, apparently still dating at the Lake every summer, have renovated my grandparents' Lakefront home and expanded it into a beautiful cottage space where yet another generation can come and experience what is, to our family, not only a summer home, but a beautiful family history. Hinkle's

Donuts is no longer there, but in its place is The Donut Shop, and we go there by boat, all of the kids bouncing in their life jackets, awaiting their first sugar of the morning. We take the pontoon to McDonalds for lunch and feed French fries to the ducks. The kids walk to Stewart's Root Beer Stand for Cyclones and fried pickles, or enjoy an afternoon of Putt-Putt and batting practice. Newly instituted outdoor theater nights were invented by hanging a white sheet on the boat dock and projecting a rented movie. (Bring your own lawn chair and enjoy the show; popcorn and Twizzlers for all!) There's a basketball hoop on the dock at the family cottage, and all of the kids cheer for their uncles playing Jet Ski Frisbee just outside of the no-wake zone.

New traditions have begun, and some have changed slightly over time, but I tend to notice more what has remained. The Lakefront cottages still celebrate the summer holidays in style; it's a constant, a way to mark the passage of another year. I love watching my children floating in the old inner tubes, catching fireflies, taking Lake Baths, and playing whiffleball, for the games have continued in force. (In fact, this next generation really looks quite promising in the yard!) The sunsets are, as always, magnificent and the Reds' games still play on the radio. And I would be remiss if I did not mention cocktail hour . . . masses of cottage families, all generations, now congregate on the patio for drinks and snacks, conversations and parties. My grandfather must enjoy knowing that we continue to have drinks and eat stinky cheese with his friends, our friends, from next door and down the Lakefront.

The rose blanket is folded in the linen closet, and I pull it out when I am tucking in my children at night, just to see the familiar faded roses covering one of my children.

While I am falling asleep, though now in a different room, it is with the same sounds from my childhood, the same whirr of a fan, and the same waves against the rocks. I can close my eyes and so easily remember being a child in this place. I can almost as easily imagine how strongly this Lake will call to my children when they are grown. I hope they will find the same joy here, in both the traditions and the possibilities that Indian Lake brings.

So yet again, I have awakened to the crunch of the gravel. It is the view, unchanged, that I long to see. I walk around the corner of the house. There is already a yellow bat lying across home plate. I look across the yard, over the daylilies--taller now, waving gently in the breeze--and there it is. The Lake. It is summer. I have arrived.