

## Dawn Schumann-2009

### Paradise

It was called Westminster Lodge when we were kids. Set on the Michigan dunes, buried in the great hardwood forests, warmed by the glow of the sun on the lake, it was truly heaven to us. It was a family camp with cottages overlooking the lake. A quick run over hot sand and we could dive into that beautiful cooling water.

In the 1940's there were no expressways going the 150 miles from Chicago to Saugatuck. But at least there was a paved road. In the past folks first took a horse buggy on the old highway 32 that went from Fort Dearborn to Mackinaw Island that hugged the lakeshore. Later they took the steamer ferry across the lake or the train to Fennville or Holland. So going forty five miles an hour on Highway 12 was fast for the day. Patience came by reading all of the Burma Shave signs. My friend Louise invited me to join her family for their summer vacation. We spent two weeks in paradise.

Uncle Frank (as I was invited to call him) was as much a part of that place as the sand. He had been coming since the 20's. He was born in China. His father had been the Head of the Presbytery for the Far East. When they returned to America, they went to summer at Westminster Lodge. Frank was the life guard and he met his future wife Muriel there. They courted (Uncle Frank was a true romantic) around the camp fires on the beach and were married in Oak Park, IL soon after. Naturally, they would return to that idyllic spot summer after summer. What better place to take their two children Louise and Bill. Bill was younger and the one we worked to avoid taking on our adventures.

Westminster Lodge had miles and miles of walking paths through the woods. Some led to the ferry that would take you across the Kalamazoo River to the town of Saugatuck. Others just meandered up and down the dunes to beautiful places to contemplate God's gifts. Those paths had (and still do) sayings by Wordsworth, Thoreau, Longfellow. You could climb a tree and marvel at the wonders that could be seen from that height. We were allowed to venture as far as we wanted, because Louise knew all of the routes and you couldn't get lost. There were two rules. Never go off alone. And NEVER go into the lake without adult supervision. Lake Michigan was the sure sign post to get back to the cottage. We were given a privilege that few children have nowadays; Freedom to dream, wander, explore. Hunger always brought us back for meal time.

Stoughton Hall was an Arts and Crafts style lodge and was situated in the center of the site on a flat area. I believe that it was built by families who came up over the years. It had a kitchen and a dining room where all of the meals were served. It also had a theater of

sorts with a small stage. That was where evening entertainment took place. The job of waiting tables and doing kitchen duty was coveted. You got paid \$3 a month and all that you could eat. We had to wait to be teens before we could aspire to such an august position. We could hardly wait. The main staff was made up of the administrator; Papa T was his name, a nurse, a life guard and a program director who taught arts and crafts.

We enjoyed roaming and swimming the most. One of the most memorable jaunts took us to the top of a dune overlooking the old entrance to the Kalamazoo River. The original entry still had its lighthouse which had been built in 1854. In 1909 the Army Corp of Engineers had cut a new harbor entrance because the old one snaked around so much that boats had trouble getting through to Saugatuck and its sister city across the river, Douglas. The sand soon covered the old entrance but amazingly the water that snaked around remained and was called the Ox-Bow lagoon. Natural springs fed the lagoon and kept it a sparkling blue reflecting the blue sky. The pilings from the original wharf could be seen above the water, sentinels of commerce from long ago. So the view from the top of the dune was magnificent. To this day artists from all over the world come to paint it, just as they had done for 100 years when we first saw it.

One particular day stands out in my memory the most. We reached the top of the dune and were admiring the view. But like most kids, our imaginations took over and we began to think about how folks had lived here in "the olden days". As we searched around to find things to create our make-believe world we found Indian arrow heads, and then we found shards of blue flow china. I think we missed lunch as we created a rather realistic fort and Indian teepees. I often wondered how those remnants of an earlier life happened to be there. It didn't matter, that became a favorite place to play. We even let Billie come with us once, but he was too rough and didn't understand the importance of the new/old world that we had created.

Years later, Louise and I did become waitresses (1951-1952) and got to stay there all summer. We had our own place to stay. It was a dorm fashioned out of an old Victorian house on the very top of a dune. We shared one of the dozen bedrooms that were on either side of a long hallway. The bathroom was at the end on the lake side. There was one toilet, a makeshift shower, and a sink that was on a deck outside. Today we would call it roughing it. Then you were lucky to have it because they "used" to have to bath in the lake, and use an outhouse---no facilities.

Our day began very early. We ran down the dune (hundreds of stairs), set the

tables, and began to serve the sleepy, hungry visitors. We had a couple of hours off to run back up the dune and do wash, or change and run down to go for a swim. Back to work promptly at 11:15, set up again, serve, clear, and then we went to Camp Gray to work with the kids from the inner city. We had to be back in the dining hall by 4:45, set up, serve, and clear. Then we were free to run to the beach, swim, and the ultimate---sing around the camp fire. It was exhausting but not one of us complained or would have traded those summers with anyone.

Camp Gray was named after the man who brought Jane Adams to see this site. She had created Hull House in Chicago and together they envisioned a place where the settlement children from the inner city of Chicago could get away from the dirt and crowds. By the 1950's the children were no longer from the settlements but rather the ghetto.

They would arrive on a bus which would drive down the narrow dirt road to the primitive cottages set in the woods. We were there to cheerfully greet them. Most had never been off the block that they lived on. Many were terrified by the woods, fearing the wolf in the "Little Red Riding Hood" story. By the time they left, wearing the lanyards that we taught them to make, they were clinging to the trees begging to stay. The beauty of nature is mesmerizing and hopefully the memory of that retreat carried them through what were surely tough lives.

We did have time off occasionally from working at Camp Gray in the afternoon. And it was one of those days that Louise and I decided to "run" into Saugatuck and get a soda at the drug store. Surely we could make it back in the three hours before dinner. Right? Wrong!!

We walked the mile from camp to the ferry. The ferry was a two sided row boat that could hold 10 or 12. Tim was the ferryman. His job was to row folks the short distance across the river. Once there was a bridge, but it only lasted a very short time before a flood took it out. Tim was also known to tipple a bit and from time to time he might disappear for a while. But we didn't equate that with our desire to run fast and get a soda. We explained to Tim as he was rowing that we would be right back after we got our soda. We figure 45 minutes at the most. He nodded and we were sure that we were set. Wrong!!

When we returned---right on time, the row boat was there, but no Tim. We ran back the two blocks to Butler Street and checked in every bar. No Tim. We began to be frantic because Papa T was counting on us. So, we dove in the river and began to swim.

Fortunately it was August and the river current was slow. Both Louise and I were strong swimmers, but the current still took us down to about the pump house before we got to the other side.

When we got out of the water we were disgustingly filthy. All of the oil from the tanning factory and dirt from heaven only knows what was all over us and in our hair. And we smelled---ugh. We ran back to camp using the old parson's path. Up the dune to bath and wash our hair, change clothes, and back down to set up for dinner. We were only 15 minutes late. If Papa T had known what we had just been through he probably would have scolded us much more than he did. I can still remember the nasty smell of the river. It is more scary now to remember than then when we young and were invincible.

Mom came to visit us just once. I had described our dorm as sitting in the most beautiful place in the world. I looked out and saw the lake through the tree tops. To my Mom, anything short of the Hilton was roughing it. She climbed the dune in her high heels, went up the stairs to our room, walked out on the deck to see our sink and the view out to the lake she failed to see the world through our eyes. Instead she looked straight down to where we burned our trash and suggested that we had paradise in a garbage dump.

It is expected that as the years go by things will change in places that we have loved. Indeed, many cottages have been replaced. Stoughton Hall burned down and so did our dorm. But what replaced them was all in scale. So when Uncle Frank came for the last time and we walked the camp to where he had buried Muriel his comment was "Some places never change." We walked to an empty place filled with Dames Rockets. This is where the cottage that Muriel and I spent our honeymoon sat among the pines. She is buried here. And this is where I want you to bury me.

And I did.