

Ann Arbor's Municipal Beach

When thousands swam in Argo Pond

"It was a lot, a lot, of fun," says Barbara Hepner Preston, remembering the summers she hung out at Ann Arbor's municipal beach in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Now the boat launch at Argo Park, the beach was on the banks of the Huron River, just north of the canoe livery. Preston and her sister, Gerry Hepner True, lived on Pontiac Trail and would go to the beach every day in the summer. "We'd walk down in the morning, go home for lunch, then go back. Sometimes we'd even go back in the evening."

The beach was a gift from Detroit Edison, which had bought the present Argo Dam in 1905 to generate electricity. In 1917, the company offered to develop the beach if the city would pay for its upkeep. The city accepted the offer, and Edison trucked in loads of sand and built a pier, three docks, and a beach house. The city paid a nominal rent of \$1 a year before eventually buying the facility in 1938 for \$100.

"On hot summer days you'd have to stand in line to get in," recalls True. Former lifeguard Dick Tasch adds, "On a good Sunday or holiday you could have more than a thousand [people]. There was not that much room for sunbathing, but lots of room in the water. Some would come for half an hour or an hour. There was a continuous flow."

Many of the regulars were from the north side (Lower Town), but kids from all over the city swam there. Some cut across Argo Dam from North Main, while others crossed the Broadway bridge and came up along the millrace. Although hoboes camped along the millrace, Tasch remembers only one bad incident. "Once a little girl came running out screaming with a hobo behind. We called the police and Red Howard [then police chief] showed up in a car." Howard made sure the perpetrator and his closest cohorts were on the next train out of town.

The docks were placed in increasingly deeper water—the first at four feet, the next at about eight feet, and the last at twelve feet. Swimmers had to pass proficiency tests to go out to the deeper docks. "They could do any stroke—crawl, breast-stroke—as long as they got out there and back," recalls Bob Ryan, lifeguard in the summer of 1942. The last dock had a tall tower, about ten feet. Getting the courage to dive from it was a real rite of passage.

Regulars fondly remember the beach manager, parks department employee Joe Bowen. "He was a nice, pleasant man," says Ryan, adding, "He didn't take any guff from kids. If they acted up, they

couldn't come back for maybe a week."

Bowen must have worked incredible hours; people remember him being there whenever the beach was open, seven days a week. He kept an eye on the whole operation but was usually at the front desk, giving out lockers and renting towels and suits ("cotton with purple stripes that you'd not be caught dead in," Tasch remembers). Sometimes the Hepner girls helped at the front desk, just for fun.

Lifeguard Tasch usually sat at the end of the pier with the rowboat next to him, but on really busy days he would stay in the boat between the second and third docks. "Deep water is where the most trouble was," he recalls. Although Tasch was a parks employee and the swimming teachers were hired by the recreation department, they worked together. The teachers spelled him every few hours, and he in turn coached the kids on their swimming when the beach wasn't too busy.

The lifeguards and the kids who came regularly got to know each other pretty well. "They were a fine bunch," Tasch recalls. "I had no trouble with rowdy or bad kids." He dubbed them "the hillbillies" because most of them lived up the hill on Longshore (then called "Cedar") or on Pontiac. Tasch sometimes brought his lunch, but often "the hillbillies would fight over who would go home and make me a sandwich. I liked that better."

When people wanted a break from swimming, the beach had a volleyball court, horseshoe courts, a slide, and a grassy place under a willow for picnics

(the tree is still there). Gerry True remembers bonfires on the beach, where she and her friends would roast marshmallows and hot dogs and drink Kool-Aid. The high point of the summer, remembered by almost everyone who used the beach, were the swimming races. True still has some of the ribbons she won.

No food was sold at the beach, probably because Bowen already had enough to do. For a time Ryan's half brother, Don Blair, and Herb Wetherbee, who owned the land directly across the street from the beach, ran a pop and candy stand. But most of the time the kids went next door to what was then the Saunders Canoe Livery for pop, potato chips, or candy. Owners William and Gladys Saunders got to know the regulars so well that once a year they treated them to a cookout breakfast. "We'd take several, maybe six, canoes down the river about a half or two-thirds of a mile and build a campfire, and Mrs. Saunders would cook us bacon and eggs," True recalls. "It was something to look forward to."

In 1936, when Detroit Edison drained Argo Pond to repair the dam, the city took the opportunity to improve the beach, cleaning the river bottom of debris, deepening it, and bringing in clean sand. The next winter the city built an island dubbed "Clever's Folly" after alderman Arbie Clever, who had pushed for the beach improvements. "They hauled sidewalk cement, sand, and gravel, and put it on the ice," recalls neighbor Laurie Howley. "It dropped when the ice melted." A lawn was

planted on the island, and the older kids loved swimming out to lie on the grass in the sun. "An old gentleman mowed it," recalls Tasch. "I'd take him out in the boat with a hand mower."

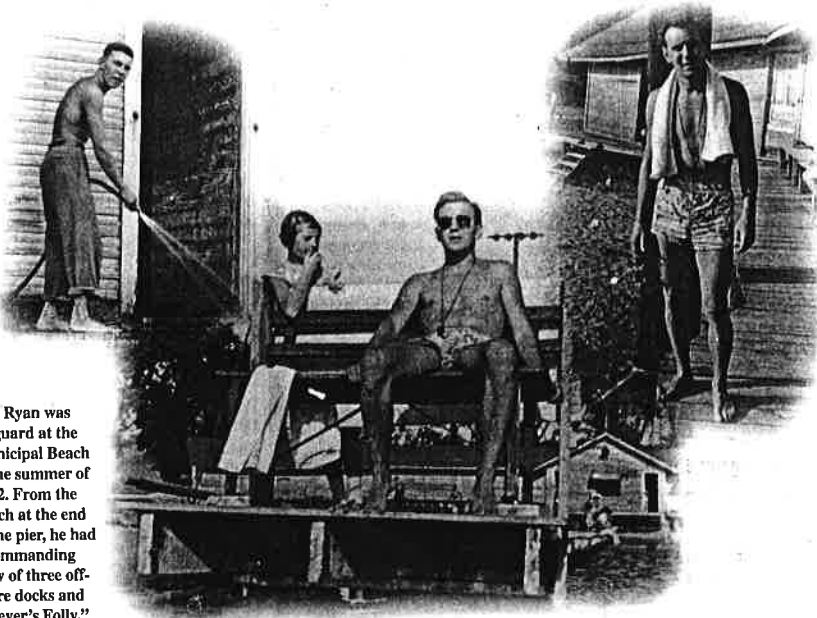
When the beach closed for the season, employees would take down the docks and store them for the winter. Tasch remembers that the deepest dock was the hardest to put up and take down. He recalls almost losing Bowen one time. "Joe was on the third dock holding a crowbar when he slipped and fell in. When he didn't come up, I dove in. I found him standing on the bottom, holding the crowbar. I told him, 'If you'd let go of the crowbar, you'd have come right up.'"

Tasch recalls that in his time the water was pretty clean. If present standards had applied then, though, the beach would probably never have opened. Pollution control efforts have cleaned up the river tremendously in the past few decades, but even now there are times when the Huron's bacteria count is too high for swimming.

Council minutes show that questions about water quality were raised in 1940, when the city was considering plans for a new beach house. The new structure was never built, and the beach closed for good at the end of the 1948 season. The buildings were demolished four years later.

Today, a small island in Argo Pond is all that remains of the municipal beach. Clever's Folly is now totally overgrown, and birds nest where local teens once sunbathed.

—Grace Shackman



Bob Ryan was lifeguard at the Municipal Beach in the summer of 1942. From the bench at the end of the pier, he had a commanding view of three offshore docks and "Clever's Folly," an artificial island.

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