



Gone In Weird NJ

Reflections From The Lincoln Park Swim Club

The Endless Summer

From the kiddie pool to the deep end with mah-jongg moms and cabana kids



by Glenn John Arnowitz

It's a hot summer day in 1968 in Lincoln Park, New Jersey. Tommy James and the Shondells' "Mony Mony" is croaking out of the tiny speaker on a portable AM radio followed by the Lemon Piper's, "Green Tambourine." Everybody is at "The Club"—that would be the Lincoln Park Swim Club, where for over 35 years residents of this quiet northern New Jersey community have found respite beside (what seemed like) the Olympic size swimming pool, in their cabanas,

on the grass, playing golf, handball or hanging out in the snack bar. I am 11 years old and over the past nine years I've journeyed through this summer rite of passage from my playpen, to the kiddie pool, and finally on to the big pool with its high dive and soft blue underbelly. (In the days before cable television and air conditioning, this was as good as it got.)

Corralled by a brown stained wooden fence the Club is our own private world, and like some biosphere, we have our own air, water, entertainment, food, culture and social hierarchy. Suntanned and chlorine-soaked, it's like we all drank the kool-aid and lived. Year after year, I become initiated with the first chords of every summer song. "Satisfaction," "Happy Together," "Summer in the City" and "Hey Jude," the endless soundtrack to my life. Owner Stephanie Ward, who doubles as pool sheriff, can be heard over the loudspeaker scolding kids daily for running, splashing or playing in the back "by the river." And

if that perfect cannonball you just executed splashed the mah-jongg moms in cabanas 1-8, you might have to endure a time-out in the office. Mr. Ward, with his sun-weathered, leathery dark skin, is pretty low-keyed, spending his days on his tractor, and always seems to be fixing something.

Cabana #14

The lockers stand at attention behind rows of cabanas that surround the pool. It is like our own little monopoly board as we pass GO through the office and make our way around the pool to the prime Boardwalk real estate occupied by the Wards (we are closer to Pacific Avenue). My family is one of the original members who snagged the same cabana (#14), poolside and center, for over 15 years. And just as my father and his brother purchased homes next door to each other in Lincoln Park when they migrated from Paterson, they remain side by side at the club with neighboring cabanas. In the early years, I was the runt of the group, always trailing behind my older cousins Mark and Randy. Ever since graduating from the kiddie pool in the early 1960s, I am dragged to swimming lessons at some ungodly hour in the morning in my blue and white striped Speedo bathing suit. But my favorite time of all is when I get to stay here all day with my dad coming by after work to have dinner and a swim. I love the way the cabana lights dance over the tiny wakes in the pool. And then there's "movie night." Every few weeks everyone gathers on the dew-soaked grass with their towels and lawn chairs to watch movies such as *The Russians Are Coming*, *The Russians Are Coming*, *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* and *Kelly's Heroes* screened over the white concrete wall of the snack bar. And it's funny how no one seems to mind that they show the same six or seven movies year after year. It is a magical time.

Summertime Blues

Fast forward 28 years later. It's 1996 and my wife and daughters and I are headed to the Club with our video camera for a visit. It's a sweltering July afternoon and it's been over 20 years since I've been here. Along with us are Erin Kelly and her husband Will Vonderhorst. Erin and I have been swapping Club stories for years with our spouses rolling their eyes every time we get

started. Although we both were members during the 1960s, we weren't in the same clique and never knew each other back then. A few years ago, Will found a box of beautiful 8 x 10 black and white promotional photos taken before the Club had officially opened. Unbeknownst to him, the photos were taken by his dad, who owned an ad agency, and this unbelievable and serendipitous find solidified Will's place in the Club's inner circle.

As we walk through the office I notice nothing has changed. The keys with their blue and red poker chips are still hanging on the pegboard behind the counter. The office is quiet and cooled with air conditioning, a sealed vestibule and the only entryway to the grounds. When I open the door to the pool area I notice there's something missing. That sound. The roar that filled the pool area. It's gone. And so are the people. The place is half full and Mrs. Ward confesses that the glory years are long gone. It's disheartening to say the least. In a few years, the Lincoln Park Swim Club will close.

The End Of The Summer

A few years ago I took the long way home and drove through Lincoln Park to visit the old neighborhood and to see what's become of the Club. The roadside sign is still there, people are on the golf course and as I drive down the gravel driveway the office comes into view. As I get closer and peek over the fence what I see is total devastation with only a few cabanas and lockers still standing. The pool, an open and decaying sarcophagus, is empty except for two feet of brown sludge and debris. I can see all the way back to the river and it all looks so small. I walk the grounds, snap a few pictures and find it hard to believe that this was the same place that held me in summer after summer while I came of age. This was sacred ground. Forget the Jersey shore. We had our own concrete beach. In Lincoln Park. At the Club.

When I approached my cousins Mark and Randy about writing an article about the Club, they were equally excited. Over the past few months we reached out to former members who generously shared their memories with us and we realized that those summers had a profound effect on anyone who was lucky enough to be there. Because of the overwhelming response we've set up a Facebook page (Lincoln Park Swim Club) where Club alumni can share their memories and photos.





French Fries, Pool Toys And The Deep End

by Randy Arnowitz

Between 1959 and 1969, the years that our family was a member of the Lincoln Park Swim Club, it is quite possible that I ate 306 pizza burgers, 284 veal parmesan platters (“vealparmplat”), 228 cheese burgers, 54 grilled cheeses, 28 tuna sandwiches and enough crispy, golden fries and double scoop Welsh Farms vanilla fudge ice cream cones to fill that entire, vast, glistening swimming pool two times over. And that was just during the summers.

The Lincoln Park Swim Club was not just a swim club. It was a way of life; a culture or rather subculture that only manifested itself each year from Memorial Day to Labor Day. It appeared as regular as the season showing up exactly as it had the previous year. Sure, we were a year older and the pinstripes on the swim team suits changed from red to blue to black but the place, the culture and the fries remained the same.

“The Club” as it became known was a carefree, wondrous summer romping ground but to us kids, sometimes mysteries, or rather a subtle, dark undercurrent seemed to lurk beneath the façade of popsicles, golf games and poolside mah-jongg marathons.

Swim Club myths, or “suburban legends” were born each summer or were handed down from season to season, from “baby pool” to the seemingly bottomless “deep end” of the “big pool.”

Our parents and Mrs. Ward, the owner of the LPSC, adamantly forbade us to trespass back by Sandy Beach—the menacing river that ran behind the Club. Sandy Beach was neither sandy nor a beach but rather that nether region that occurred like some strange limbo land somewhere between the dusty picnic area and behind the kiddie pool, past those rear lockers and further beyond the playground with those diabolical, metal swings that always had a way of hitting you in the chops and sending you off to Chilton for a stitch or two.

Even more frightening than those cavernous restrooms behind the snack bar, that river was an ominous, foreboding place and yet we were incapable of staying away. Who could say what drew us there and held us in its murky grip. Was it the danger of falling off its unstable banks and being swept away or the threat and thrill of a slimy, swamp thing that we were convinced was lurking and ready to pounce the minute that we were left behind or “ditched” by our buddies?

Some of the myths and tales were not so much scary but intriguing. Aside from questioning whether there really was an alligator in the golf course pond, we wondered how our mothers knew that after eating we had to wait a specific amount of time before getting back in the pool again. “You’ll get a cramp. Wait 30 minutes,” my mom would decree after lunch. I was convinced that our moms had a chart somewhere that spelled it out. Tuna sandwich: 35 minutes. Egg salad: 40 minutes: Hot dog: 25 minutes unless accompanied by onion rings, which could put you over into the 50-minute range. Add a milkshake and you could be out for the rest of the day. Not only did we not know how these numbers were determined, but I was never sure what a cramp actually was or where you got one.

Personally, I had more pressing questions about the Swim Club phenomenon. I often wondered where the heck all those people went when the summer ended. I had heard talk of faraway places like Verona, Nutley and West Caldwell but had my own theory. I believed that these seasonal friends and families simply spun themselves into pod-like chrysalises and pupated all winter long in their garages or basements, tucked discreetly behind the inflatable pool toys and lawn chairs. Come summer I envisioned them emerging from their cocoons, donning their Speedos and swim caps and heading out once again for The Club.

Double Pool Reflection

by Mark Arnowitz

I was thrilled to be asked by my cousin, Glenn Arnowitz, to collaborate on a reflection piece of the Lincoln Park Swim Club, a place where we spent our summers in Lincoln Park, New Jersey. My family was a member during my childhood and teenage years. As did hundreds of other children of the 1950s and ’60s, I came of age there. I wanted to include a friend of mine on this trip down Memory Lane, but at this writing I could not reach her.

She and I were fast friends then, and we still keep in touch with each other to this day, almost 40 years later. I fashioned a few questions to help me focus our discussion – discussions that would have begun in the fall of 2008 – but alas, we were unable to connect. This dialog, then, is one-sided, but does not change the fact that we as children were indeed so lucky to have had summer experiences like the ones mentioned in this article.

Below is but a sampling of my current reflections on “The Club”:

How did we feel about the Lincoln Park Swim Club?

She might have said:

“I always felt she was a mother ground for all of us. She sustained our smiles, comforted our sorrows, guided us through phases of love, and fostered our competitive selves. But most of all, she held us all so close, kept us connected, as if we were one family.”

I would then have recalled:

“I would agree, but I remember that you suffered a tragedy while we were children there. I had no such experience to grow me up too early. For me, I came of age blissfully in that *Magical Kingdom*.”

How does The Club follow you in your life even today?

She might have said something like:

“You would not believe how many of my dreams are of the club, alive with color. Psychologically I run to a happier place at night, and it is apparent...that (going to The Club)...was one of the greatest highlights in my lifetime. Closing my eyes (or even wide open for that matter), and remembering the pool at night, especially during a dance, or movie. So still, so dark, yet mirrored in the perimeter is a rainbow reflection of vibrant colors, shining back from the numerous party lights strung on the cabanas.”

I would then add:

“My dreams are different, of course, but I in my mind I am always a star in



Beach movie. Yes, that’s it, and you, of course, would have been Annette Funicello.”

Then she might have corrected me:

“I thought we were more like Moondoggie and Gidget (laughs).”

Can you share any specific remembrances?

She might have thought for a moment, and offered:

“All the young girls wearing rollers in their hair; the day of an eagerly awaited event, be it a Hawaiian Luau or the Country Dances. The carefully planned outfits for the occasions, such as the haute couture for square dancing: Our red and white check shirts and neckerchiefs, doing the Virginia reel. I grabbed your arm and twirled you.”

Sharing the memory, I would agree:

“I can visualize you and your girlfriends dancing “The Hitch Hiker” to the Essex’ hit single, “Easier Said Than Done.”

Can either of you remember any troubling times at the LPSC, as well as those tender times?

For this question, she would not hesitate:

“The nerve wracking wonder during the week: ‘Is he going to ask me to sit with him at the movie or ask me to dance?’ I would find every excuse in the

Glenn John Arnowitz grew up in Lincoln Park, NJ where for 12 years his summer home was cabana #14 at the Lincoln Park Swim Club. He is a creative director, musician, actor and writer living in Warwick, NY with his wife and 2 daughters. For more information, visit www.bigcowmusic.com.

Mark Arnowitz is a public school teacher, a (sometime) college English professor, and a writer. He lives with his wife Brenda and three children in West Milford. Among Mark’s quotes we found this: “All I am I owe to the Lincoln Park Swim Club. Valuable dating tips, the love of a delicious veal parmesan platter, the execution of a great flip off the diving board. It all started there. If only life were like that.”

Randy Arnowitz or “Mr. Greenjeans” is a gardener, gardening coach and writer in Santa Barbara. He makes his home in a small potting shed with 200 orchids and his golden retriever named Peaches. By day he makes things grow and by night, writes about how he does that. He is convinced that he will eventually sell a screenplay and be able to hire someone else to mow his lawn.





This was sacred ground. Forget the Jersey shore. We had our own concrete beach

world to walk past your cabana looking for you, looking for you on other side of the pool.”

I would be in complete accord:

Ditto on that one: “Would I get up the nerve to ask her to the movie or the dance? Why is she not walking over here so that I can accidentally bump into her and ask her out?” Those were the questions that came rushing forward.

Much has been said about *Movie Night at the Lincoln Park Swim Club*. Can you add any of your own memories?

In closing, it is anyone’s guess what she would have remembered, but here goes:

“Oh, seeing *Born Free* and experiencing the rush of emotions, not solely

from the movie but the reactions to it. I remember everyone crying, especially the boys. An awakening for me at such a young age, realizing boys had deep feelings too. They weren’t all sticks and snails and puppy dogs tails.”

Finally, I would have summed up:

“Well, the defining moment of my own coming of age did not happen on a blanket or in a locker. It was simply sitting on a bench at the eighth or ninth tee at 10 PM or so talking with someone that I cared for. Sneaking away from the movie of the week, was, in a way, sneaking away also from all the angst of growing up, at least for one night. That is my snapshot that I will always carry with me of the Lincoln Park Swim Club.”



ON THE COVER:

Evil African Idol Curses The Arthur Kill

Elizabeth, New Jersey is often thought of as a gritty industrial city. Among its many charms is its waterfront, which has gone through a dramatic transformation over the last 30 or so years. Each day dozens of men (mostly immigrants) gather at several concrete piers and cast their fishing lines into the murky, brackish and still polluted portion of the Hudson estuary known as the Arthur Kill. The Arthur Kill meets the Kill Van Kull (which separates Bayonne from Staten Island and connects to New York Harbor) at Newark Bay.

This side of the estuary has been dredged to 40 feet and is primarily used for commercial shipping. The shared port of Newark and Elizabeth is the third largest container port in the United States and Canada. Daily, ships from around the world are piloted up the channel by a fleet of tugboats. Sometimes these ships arrive in distress from their long voyage. Sailors tend to be a superstitious lot and place great faith in “lucky” trinkets, statues and jewelry from their home ports.

One day I was taking pictures at Veterans Memorial Park along the Arthur Kill and several fishermen approached and asked me to look at something that a tanker from Africa had just tossed overboard. It appeared at first to be a small person covered in seaweed but upon closer inspection I saw that it was a wooden statue nearly covered in rusty nails that were used to hold chains. The statue’s right arm was up and it held a short metallic spear. There was a two-inch diameter hole in its forehead and a small box on its chest. The statue was heavy and angry looking and most of the locals crossed themselves and



moved their rods upstream away from it.

One Haitian man I’d seen before running errands for the others “adopted” the statue. I shot some pictures and laughed at the idea that it was “bad juju.” Not long after these pictures were taken a nor’easter hit the coast and the river rose well over its banks, dumping thousands of plastic water/soda bottles all over the sidewalks of the waterfront park and eroding some of the riverbanks. One of the things lost in the storm was the shelter that the locals had built over time with found wood and rugs. I returned that day to take pictures and was told by the Haitian man that it was the statue’s fault and that it will always bring evil into the lives of whoever possesses it. The statue was never seen again and the fishermen who came in contact with the statue have religiously avoided the area claiming “even the fish are smart enough to avoid the spot.”

—Darren Bryden / www.flickr.com/photos/urpidxdab