

Looking Around Radnor Township

Haunting of Wayne Natatorium

This is a column about ghosts. They are ghosts from the turn of the century. They reside at the Wayne Natatorium, a swimming pool which flourished on Willow Ave. in Wayne many years ago. These ghosts of the past are usually a quiet bunch during the Winter, but with the Memorial Day opening of swimming pools, they become active once again. I imagine they're reminiscing about the days when the Wayne Natatorium was extolled as the world's largest inland swimming pool.

I feel especially close to these ghosts because from my kitchen window I look across our sloping yard to Willow Ave. The Natatorium was located slightly to the south of the present Willow Ave. On warm Summer evenings, when I'm up to my elbows in dinner dishes and soapsuds, I'm positive I can hear these ghosts of days gone by laughing and recalling the swimming meets of years gone by.

In early accounts the Wayne Natatorium was known as Kelly's Dam. It was not a very formal affair, more like the "ol' swimming hole." Later, about 1895, some entrepreneurs issued stock, created the Wayne Natatorium Association, made some improvements, and hailed "the ol' swimming hole" as the world's largest inland open air pool.

Boarded by a high wooden fence, it was over 500 feet long and had an average width of 80 feet. The pool waters were from two to eight feet deep and fed from the waters of Gulph Creek.

At the western end of the pool there was a woman's dressing room and office built on piles. This building stands today, an immaculate private residence, perched at the 90 degree turn of Willow Ave. Several years ago Mrs. Lawrence, the owner of that home, invited me in to view the fireplace which is a relic of Natatorium days. It's beautiful burnished wood shines as beautifully as it must have 80 years ago.

Four elderly Wayne residents remembered the Natatorium for the Radnor Memorial Library's Oral History Project. Monte George de Canizares' father managed the Natatorium. Later, his father founded what is today the Argus Printing. Mr. de Canizares remembers his childhood swimming instructor, Mr. Kistler, then swimming coach at the Natatorium, and later an instructor at the University of Pennsylvania. Mr. Kistler's technique for teaching his young pupils was unique. A heavy wire was stretched between two telegraph poles located at either end of the pool. A belt on a pulley rope assured the novice's safety as he learned the finer points of how to swim. According to Mr. de Canizares, other less sophisticated methods, such as throwing the non-swimmer in the water, were occasionally employed.

Under Mr. Kistler's direction the Wayne Natatorium was the scene of swimming meets that drew good sized crowds, including many swimming enthusiasts from Philadelphia. An early brochure describing these meets offers the information that the site of the Natatorium is "just one-eighth of a mile from the Wayne train station and surrounded by trees."

In the Winter, when the water froze, the ice skaters met there. Ice skaters must be a quieter, more intense type for I never hear their ghosts carousing like the swimmers! Perhaps that's because my kitchen window is closed. Mrs. Frances Fronefield Gant remembers her lovely young aunt who ice skated there by lantern light and warmed herself by the stove in the clubhouse. She vividly recalls her aunt's long black velvet skating outfit which was trimmed in white fur. Quite a switch from the casual jeans-oriented skating attire of today. Mrs. Gant also recalls Mr. de Canizares' mother selling gingerbread for the summertime crowd.

That famous one cent a slice

gingerbread is also recalled by Douglas Wendell. He remembers cold Winter days sitting around Mrs. de Canizares' warm stove and eating the gingerbread with his friends, the Hart and Lynch boys. It was at the icebound Natatorium that he learned to ice skate on "rocker skates." Mr. Wendell also recalls that back in the days when the Natatorium was still known as Kelly's Dam, his father wanted to preserve the area as a public park. Herman Wendell was a prominent Wayne businessman and builder.

One of my own personal favorite tidbits of information about the Natatorium came from Mary Conkle, a 90-plus Wayne resident. Miss Conkle thinks that the garage that belonged to our home before the land was subdivided, was the men's dressing room. Although it seems like a long distance for the men to travel to change, this is one story I'd like to confirm. If any of you readers remember the men's dressing room, please let me know.

According to Mr. de Canizares soon after the turn of the century in 1902 or 1903 the Natatorium closed. It was a victim of a drought which affected the water supply from Gulph Creek and caused a buildup of algae and the new craze for bicycling which swept the country.

And so, the world's largest inland open air pool has been replaced by neat

rows of homes on Willow Ave. I'm sorry to see one of Wayne's claims to fame disappear, but happy that the ghosts who enjoyed those carefree days still visit the old site each Summer. I wonder if the young families living on Willow Ave. ever hear their ghostly calls?



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