

## Summer, and memories of water

Written by Dan and Stanley Kellams

Thursday, 12 July 2012 21:41 - Last Updated Thursday, 12 July 2012 23:07

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I am lying, face down, stretched out and holding my breath, in water two feet deep. It's the baby pool in Bever Park in Cedar Rapids, and I am teaching myself to swim. I'm six years old.

The year is 1942. My little brother sits near the pool's rim, splashing. My mother rests on a bench, watching. We have come here by bus from Marion. It's the safest place she knows for kids to play in the water.

I make small, dog-paddling movements with my hands. The water isn't deep enough for a full overhand stroke. My effort takes me a few feet into shallow water, where my stomach scrapes the brown concrete bottom of the pool. I lift my head out of the water, take a deep breath, turn, bury my face in the water again and start paddling in the other direction.

I do this for an hour, back and forth like a caged dolphin. I'm ready for a bigger pool.

MY FATHER, STANLEY KELLAMS, learned to swim in Marion's Indian Creek when he was a boy in the 1910s and 1920s. There was no swimming pool in Marion then. He recalled his experiences in a guest column in the Marion Sentinel dated Jan. 17, 1946. He wrote:

"[T]here were always two or three swimming holes [in the creek] and each was always full of naked boys. I learned to swim in Indian Creek when I was six, and I don't believe I owned a bathing suit until I was out of high school and began to patronize modern and antiseptic pools.

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“My earliest swimming was done at the ‘Long Log.’ Each hole had its name and as the creek filled old holes in its bed from year to year, intrepid explorers would always find new ones and appropriate names would be applied.

“ ‘Long Log’ was named for a great tree which had fallen and lay lengthwise with the current along one bank of the stream. This hole was about half a mile north of the old fairgrounds, now the golf club. The deep water was at the root end of the log and we used that natural elevation for our diving board.

“However, the water was not quite deep enough for the bigger boys, so with the help of my father and A. A. Hardin, we undertook to build an ambitious dam of sand bags ... Our dam was a success and probably raised the level of the water two or three feet. In fact it was so successful that it caused considerable consternation and caustic comment at the dam downstream at the mill which was then grinding buckwheat by water power.

“However, this difficulty was overcome, and we enjoyed a long summer of fine swimming. It was at the ‘Long Log’ that I first achieved swimming success — under water ...

“My efforts at surface swimming were rewarded the next summer at the ‘Willows,’ a new hole about 200 yards upstream from the ‘Long Log.’ It was here that I first conquered the depth and width of Indian Creek, over and back. I thought that all was lost when I made the mistake of ‘letting down’ in water over my head and hands. However I made crossing safely with my father, my brother, Mr. Hardin, and Harlan Briggs forming an enthusiastic audience if an indifferent lifesaving crew ...

“After the ‘Willows’ there was a series of fine holes. ‘Grassy Bank’ was just below the ‘Long Log.’ I broke my arm there by diving into shallow water. Ernie and Hooley [Hardin brothers] helped me dress and get home. Hooley went on ahead to carry the message and I was attended by my mother and a group of kind neighbors all the way from the Tenth Street bridge ...

“The ‘Sand Bar’ was the favorite hole for several years, and many kids learned to swim there. It had a sloping beach on the east side of the creek, and a high bank over deep water for diving on the west side.

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“Phil Crew and I used to swim at the ‘Sand Bar,’ and I remember how we would come home from a long swim to eat baked bean sandwiches and smoke pieces from an old wicker chair which had been abandoned in our woodshed. Phil and I must have smoked up most of that old chair. Its porous slender segments were much handier than cigarettes made of corn silk or coffee, but the smoke was so bitter and hot that our tongues would almost blister ...

“Our swimming season was very long. Someone always took a brief and shivering plunge during a soft day in April to find out how the water was. They always returned with goose pimples and running noses to tell us the water was fine.

“However by mid-May the season was in full bloom. Through June and July and the dog days of August, when we splashed the green scum away from the swimming area, and into the fall, Indian Creek was full of cavorting kids.

“Every day we came home with dirty chins, which is still the badge of creek swimmer, and cannot be won in a pool.”

ALTHOUGH SOME of my friends swam often in Indian Creek, I did so only once or twice. The hole we swam in couldn't have been far from ‘Long Log.’ It was a nice deep spot, and someone had strung a rope from a tree, so we could swing out and drop into the muddy pool. We too swam naked.

We also visited the YMCA in Cedar Rapids a few times, and swam naked there in its indoor pool. There was a wonderful fresh feeling to it, almost baptismal.

But I preferred the American Legion Pool in Marion, a vast playground that attracted kids by the hundreds. As we approached the pool, we could hear the shrieks from a block away and could sense, if not smell, the medicinal odor of chlorine. On foot or on a bike, we picked up our pace. Not a moment to lose.

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The pool, built in 1929, was one of the largest in the county. It had an unusual, amoeba-like shape, with only one 90-degree angle, the result of a decision when it was built to fit it among five large trees.

It was divided into three areas: a baby pool with depths ranging from a few inches to two feet, a large free-swimming area with a depth of four feet and a 10-foot-deep diving area. This area had four diving boards, two about three feet high, one six feet high and a third 10 feet high. (Boards higher than one meter are rarities today in public pools because of liability concerns. The new Bever Park pool, built in 2002, has a water slide and a one-meter diving board; many newer pools have no diving board at all.)

On hot days in the 1940s and 1950s, before air conditioning, as many as 500 people lined up before the pool opened at noon for general swimming. Admission prices were a quarter for children and 35 cents for adults.

Tots, tweens and teens swarmed the place. Young mothers sat on wooden benches just outside the pool, watching their children romp. They pushed coins through the wire fence so the kids could visit the snack bar.

There were always a few teenage boys lounging against the fence, resting on their forearms with their hands above their heads, grasping the fence as if about to climb it. They ogled the female lifeguards, tan and remote in their authority, and scanned the crowd for glimpses of swimsuit-clad girls they admired.

Lifeguards sat on high chairs or patrolled the concrete platform that surrounded the water. They brought running children to a halt with a blast of their whistles.

A tremendous clamor rolled over the pool, a combination of laughter, splashing water, the bellows of older children and the squeals of younger ones.

The changing rooms were so dark and wet they could have been underground. A dank concrete corridor ran through the center of the structure. Small changing stalls and showers lined sides of

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the room, each shielded by mildewed canvas curtains.

After their showers, customers took their clothing baskets down the corridor, waded through a small puddle of icy water containing a chemical that killed athlete's foot, turned in their baskets and, if the mood struck them, broke into the sun by running through the baby pool, diving over the rope that marked its edge and stroking for the far side.

Staff members regularly patrolled the area, enforcing the requirement to shower. The staff was always on the lookout for kids with open sores, which could set off ringworm or impetigo, two highly contagious diseases.

"If a kid with sores got past the ticket seller, it was rare he got past the people in the basket room," wrote Ed Reed, who worked at the pool many years. They shouted, "Hey, kid, you can't come in here. You got sores on you." They gave the kid his money back and sent him home, often in tears.

"Come back when you're cured," they yelled at his retreating back.

Others were also denied admittance. The swimming pool discriminated against people of color. As an enterprise owned by a private organization, the American Legion, the pool apparently had that right.

There were no signs proclaiming the policy, nor was it widely discussed. Many young people didn't know it existed; others were dimly aware of it. No one protested it. Many kids in Marion had never met a black person.

Ed Reed saw the ban invoked only once, when a black couple with two children tried to get in. An assistant manager turned them away with these words: "We have the right to refuse admission to anyone."

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Marion High School in the early 1950s had only one person of color. He was Hispanic. The boy played on the football and basketball teams, was an honor student, and was voted one of the leaders of his class. He wasn't much browner than a lifeguard, but he couldn't go to the pool.

*(Dan Kellams is a Marion High School graduate and the author of "A Coach's Life: Les Hipple and the Marion Indians," which contains some of the material used in this article. Stanley Kellams grew up in Marion, played basketball for Marion High School, attended Cornell College and lived in Marion most of his adult life. He died in 1990.)*