

Lakeside Community's Namesake

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"Lovely Lake Lucille, nestling in an arm of the Middle Mountains" is how this private lakeside community off South Mountain Road was described in a 1928 brochure advertising lots for summer cottages and bungalows.

At that time, selling points were, as noted in the brochure, scenery that "delights the eye and inspires the mind to calm and peaceful thoughts ... waters of the Lake, pure and clear as crystal ... brook trout ... a deep artesian well drilled down into the red sandstone rock" and accessibility. It was billed as being three miles west of "Haverstraw-on-Hudson," and short distances from various ferry docks – the New Jersey side of the 125th Street Ferry, the west terminus of the Dyckman Street Ferry and the west slip of the Tarrytown-Nyack Ferry.

"It is also only 28 miles from the New Jersey approach to the New York-New Jersey Hudson River Suspension Bridge," states the brochure. The upper level of that bridge, later named the George Washington Bridge, was ready for traffic in 1931.

For Ed Jeffs, the private community's historian, "Middle Mountains" may actually have referred to the Hi Tor range on the right and a little hill on the left.

Jeffs moved to the lake from the Bronx in 1965 with his wife, Annette, and son, Joseph. He took it upon himself to set down the area's history about a year ago. Otherwise, Jeffs said, "I realized it would be lost." Since he has posted the information on the Internet at www.lakelucille.com, people from as far away as South Carolina have contributed tidbits.

Dembnicki said she went to the Street School on Zukor Road when it had three classrooms, and she walked there all the way from the lake. Street School is now used for community events and administration in the Clarkstown Central School District.

"My father, Joseph, was a source for all odds and ends. When someone wanted something strange, like a wrench that would open the sluice gate, he had it."

The lake incorporates different eras in our collective history. World War II wounded naval personnel would come to the lake from the nearby Huntington Estate, used as a rehabilitation center.

The centerpiece of the estate was a large mansion torn down by the Palisades Interstate Park Commission to make room for High Tor State Park, said Clarkstown historian Robert Knight. Dembnicki remembers the recuperating soldiers. "The boys would come down periodically and go for a swim and fish a bit," she said.

There is a memorial at the lake to Lawrence O. Rose, born and raised there, who was a casualty of war in Vietnam in 1968. He was a member of the 101st Airborne Screaming Eagles and was memorialized by a West Point Honor Guard and a bagpipe band.

There was also a peace march during the Vietnam era, organized by the lake's children.

The dam, rebuilt in 2001 in part due to damage created by Hurricane Floyd, is dedicated to the memory of Fred Siegriest, who was a member of the New City Ambulance Corps and "gave his heart, energy and efforts to the community," according to Jeffs' history.

The 17-acre lake, originally a small feeder stream of the Hackensack River, was created when farmer and landowner Gustave Schnepf dammed up the stream. The lake was named for his wife, Lucille.

The western part of the lake was owned by the Roberts family, who had been farming in the area since the late 1700s.

Schnepf's home was one of the original four on the property around the lake, and Jeffs says the number of houses has grown to 79. About 75 percent of the homes were winterized by the 1960s. Now all of them are.

A home on South Mountain Road, still located at the main entrance to the lake, was once a general store and restaurant run by the mother of Lillian Dembnicki, who has lived at the lake since the 1930s. "My mother, Bertha Danis, sold ice cream and candy," said Dembnicki, who brought up her own family here. "There were a couple of tables with chairs. She'd make pies and sandwiches. The kids just wanted someplace to hang around."

One of the lake's legends involves a "monster turtle," sighted in 1962. Weighing between 40 and 60 pounds, it was surmised, the snapping beast terrorized swimmers that summer.

Lake Lucille, which has had its own property owners association since 1936, still carries on some of the traditions started in preceding decades – fishing contests, boat races, ice skating parties and picnics.

Lillian Dembnicki said she never appreciated the lake as much as she does now. "It was a beautiful place to grow up in."

Ed Jeffs is content that the lake remains tied to an earlier time. The roads remain unpaved.

"Sometimes I see the deer walking across the frozen lake," Jeffs said. "It's like another world here."

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