

Dunham Lake Recollections From the 50's & 60's

By Steve Skinner



Paul, Elizabeth and Steve Skinner in 1966 in front of 1479 Blue Heron

The Rattlesnake Incident

In the late summer of 1967, after graduating from Albion College, and before I started my first teaching job in Racine, Wisconsin, I purchased my first new car, a '67 VW fastback. It had a standard transmission and I enjoyed being "shifty". My brother, Paul, was about to start college, so he was as interested in the new car as I was. One evening I let him take the car for a drive alone, and when he returned, he was dangling a dead snake out the driver side window as he drove up to our parents' home on Blue Heron Drive. He recalls that he was turning onto Woodcock Way from Tipsico Lake Road when he saw a snake on the road. Being male and a recent high school graduate behind the wheel of a new car, he did what many would do, even today. He ran over the snake. Upon investigation, he was surprised to see that it was no ordinary snake;

the rattles at the end of the tail were a dead giveaway. We were used to seeing snakes often near the beach. These were northern water snakes, and would stand their ground if approached. Their markings often led the weekend troupe of visitors from the city to call them rattlesnakes, but Paul and I knew northern water snakes were not dangerous. So this snake, about two feet long, and with a different shaped head and rattles was a big deal. We had lived at Dunham Lake for ten years at this point and had never seen a massasauga rattlesnake, in spite of our extensive exploration. Paul cut off the rattles and took them to friend who encased them in plastic. Even in the plastic, the rattles made a buzzing sound when shaken. The only massasauga we ever saw became a key fob, a sad conclusion from a point of view some 46 years later. The only other evidence of a rattlesnake happened when one of our spaniel dogs returned home one time with a much enlarged, painful front leg, without any sign of injury. Paul said that when he shook the encased rattles, the dogs would react violently to the sound. It is possible that the dogs encountered *sistrurus catenatus*, the massasauga rattlesnake, more than once at Dunham Lake.

Fringed Gentians

Flowers marked the seasons at Dunham Lake, and I was very aware of them. Trilliums, blood root, spring beauty, wild ginger, and violets in the spring, asters, goldenrod, and tyrolean knapweed in the fall and in the early summer, queen anne's lace, and a patch of fringed gentians growing between the path at the beach and the lake just before the little dam. I remember these flowers growing vigorously in the early 60's. The delicate little blue trumpets with fringed petals were very distinctive, and we always took care not to pick them or step on them. However, they were growing near a very traveled place, so their existence was threatened even then. On the weekends, the lake bulged with people, and I am sure the little gentians were picked. At some point when I returned for a visit, they were gone.

Bottle Gentians

At the southwest corner of Petrel Court and Blue Heron Drive, there was a patch of bottle gentians growing in the road ditch. The land was a bit wet at this spot, and right across Blue Heron Drive was an open gravel pit. When I identified them, I was surprised that they were gentians, since the only other gentians I knew were the fringed variety. The closed elongated blooms certainly did look like small blue bottles, so the logic of the common name was apparent. This was the only place at Dunham Lake where I had found bottle gentians growing. Like the disappearing

fringed gentians, as more people moved into Dunham Lake and more suburban landscapes replaced natural flora, species started to vanish. I was more aware of this because my mother had spent a decade cultivating a yard filled with indigenous woody plants. We had no grass but rather a forest floor. Especially in the 90's, her "yard" made it look as though our house was a living thing, a curious mushroom, having sprung from the forest floor.

The Gravel Pit

Strange as it sounds, the open gravel pit, south of Blue Heron and west of Harlequin, where Blue Heron Drive, Petrel Court and Harlequin Court came together provided entertainment for two young boys growing up at Dunham Lake in the late 50's. It sounds romantic thinking about growing up at Dunham Lake in the 50's before VHS, CD's, cell phones and the digital age, but entertainment was sometimes difficult to find. We fished, explored, cleared some lots for money, and swam, but we were pretty isolated. Our father used the family car to drive to work in Detroit, and often he did not get back home until after supper. That is where the gravel pit came in. What we called the gravel pit was a string of two open pits totaling about 100 feet long 30 feet wide and about 6 feet deep. The multitude of rocks each with an underside just waiting to be discovered, as well as a seemingly infinite number of layers the deeper you dug, made the pit a real source of entertainment. Fossils were often exposed as we rooted around and sometimes we found what my parents called "pudding stones". These coconut sized quartzite conglomerates with red jasper inclusions, really did look like their namesake. My mother included this locally available geology in the landscaping around our house, which really enhanced her indigenous planting. Since the rocks had names, the gravel pit provided a chance to categorize and identify rocks and minerals, and gave a reason to own a few precious books from the Golden Nature Guide series. To this day, identifying birds, rocks, plants, trees, mammals, reptiles and insects is something I enjoy doing, and I trace this interest to a small pit at Dunham Lake which provided entertainment for two boys growing up where there were only a handful of homes.

Beautiful Bryophytes

Plants are classified in part by how they reproduce. Taken together, plants classified as Bryophytes are more primitive than modern plants because of their unusual reproduction and also because they produce no flowers or seeds. Mosses belong to this group, and also an unusual group of primitive plants called liverworts. I remember that my 9th grade biology teacher at Milford High School was rather amazed when I brought a small liverwort sample to class as an example when we

were studying Bryophytes in school. She asked immediately where I found the liverwort sample. Dunham Lake, of course, and in a recent visit to Dunham Lake this September (2013), I found them growing still in the very same place I found them in 1959. Clinging quietly to the lip of bank where land and water meet and many boats rest at the park, a mass of overlapping small liver-shaped green scales continue to thrive, preserving modern plants' connection to more ancient times. Part of the beauty of Dunham Lake is the diversity of living things. The wisdom to create a green belt, prohibit lake front homes, and enforce no boat motors has helped foster a unique diversity at Dunham Lake. Much of this diversity has remained alive and well during the 56 years I have known Dunham Lake and its surrounding land.

Indian Pipe

Many kinds of fungi grow at Dunham Lake. Recently during a visit to Dunham Lake this September (2013), I found several clusters of shriveled but identifiable fungi growing together in an 8 inch ring as I walked the greenbelt. The slim, pale white stalks with dried brown bent heads, could not hide their identity. Earlier in the summer, the pipe shape of the then ghostly white heads would immediately be called miniature pipes by anyone who saw them, and Indian Pipe would have been a self-explanatory name. I remember these uniquely shaped fungi from my boyhood years at Dunham Lake, and am pleased to find them still.

Sassafras

A polite expletive? Perhaps, but not at Dunham Lake! One fond memory of my boyhood at Dunham Lake was the presence of "the Michigan tree". With three distinctive leaf shapes, mitten with thumb, mitten with no thumb or fingers, and mitten with three fingers, this thin, tall, forest floor tree grew where its feet could be damp. It is found still along the lake path on the east side of Dunham Lake, straining to put its smallish canopy high enough to get a little more light. The rough, furrowed bark, long straight trunk, and small stature (a trunk three inches across is a large tree at Dunham Lake) but tall height, gives the sassafras an almost comical appearance. The fall colors of the tree are golds and rosy pinks. My mother used to send me sassafras leaves in the fall to remind me of Dunham Lake. The sassafras hides another secret. Scratch a small green twig and smell the plant. The sweet smell of root beer is unmistakable, and the history of the use of the oil from this tree is interesting. Walking along the lake path, I noticed many small sassafras trees 2 feet tall or shorter, a new generation of the Michigan tree.

How Cool is Ice? **By Steve Skinner**

Well, pretty cool if you were two boys growing up at Dunham Lake in the late 50's. My brother Paul and I were the only children living at Dunham Lake then. In fact there were only about a half a dozen homes altogether at Dunham Lake in the fall of 1957. I was in 7th grade and my brother in 3rd grade and the winter of '57 was our first experience with a frozen Dunham Lake. With no car besides the one our father drove to work and no digital devices except the axe and saw we used to chop wood left in the wake of the power line easement, feeding our fireplace and exploring were our only diversions in the winter. When the edges of the lake started to freeze in November, we tested the ice at its very edge. It amazed us to feel the ice give beneath our feet in a very rubbery way. One only needed to move faster than the elastic ice to avoid falling through, and of course it was a game we both took to the limit. One fall season in particular was unusual because there was no snow until after Christmas, so the lake was a frozen mirror with an open spot in the middle. That Christmas, we both received ice skates as gifts, and Christmas Day, we decided to skate completely around the edge of the lake. Exploring the frozen lake fifty feet from the shoreline while the center remained unfrozen was great fun for two boys, and because there was no snow, the bottom of the lake underneath the ice revealed great detail. This transit became a Christmas Day tradition, and once we pressed the elastic ice just a bit too much. I was skating in the lead and as I passed over a patch of dark ice, it gave way. My brother, who was right behind me, fell through the ice. I turned quickly and anchoring myself with the point of my blade, extended my other leg towards Paul. He grabbed the blade of my skate and pulled himself out onto the ice. We learned that day about spring fed lakes, and how the ice is often thinner where the spring flows into the lake. I seem to recall that we also had a spring in our step making our way home. Paul was soaked and cold but we were both smiling. I don't recall my mother smiling much, but our parents never placed much prohibition on our exploration. We were young boys, and all of Dunham Lake was ours to discover.

Thunder Ice **By Steve Skinner**

In the winter of 1957, my brother Paul and I were the only two children at Dunham Lake. We had explored the shoreline of the lake as it started to freeze in November of '57 and skated all the way around the shoreline by Christmas of '57. By January of 1958, the lake was frozen completely and we walked across it, and tried to find the sunken island. We were startled the first time we experienced the ice expansion-cracking, especially cracking near us or even under our feet. The initial boom and the

grating sound of the ice relaxing after the expansion were new to us, and we wondered how it sounded to the fish. As we tried our hand at ice fishing using tip-ups, and cautiously tested the clear spots in the ice where springs flowed up from the lake bottom, we realized that ice took many forms. Later, on cold still winter nights as we lay in our beds, we would hear that deep-throated boom of the lake, groaning under the relentless pressure of ice expanding. We knew that sound intimately and came to call it thunder ice.

By late March, we witnessed an entirely different ice sound. As the spring thaw began and the lake acquired that vivid dark blue filtered look of melting ice, the “ice lottery” became the topic of much speculation. When would the ice go out? There was much discussion of the meaning of “out”. We each had our date picked and my brother and I descended the hill down through the common park often to check on the progress of the melt. We noticed that as the ice melted, surface water melted channels into the ice; it became honey combed and not strong enough to support our weight. Then it happened. Clusters of channeled ice began bobbing in freshly exposed lake water, Dunham Lake became a gigantic wind chime and the ice lottery was decided for another year.