
Big Cedar Lake

Between the Depression and World War Two

Joseph Cutler Diedrich

All of the long and lovely summers of my childhood were spent at Big Cedar Lake, from my birth in 1927 until 1945, when I went off to defeat the Japanese. I was absolutely certain, then, that Cedar Lake was the best place on earth. Now, looking back from the vantage of those many years and a life spent all over the world I suspect I might have been right.

Those long ago summers were spent at our cottage at Oak Lodge, a summer resort just north of Timmer's owned by my grandmother, Effra Cutler and her brother Will Maxon. Except for several hundred of feet belonging to the von Schleinitz family, the Oak Lodge property extended south about a half mile of the shoreline of Big Cedar Lake from the German Village Road to the gate ninety feet south of the outlet dam at the beginning of Cedar Creek, where it met the Timmer's property. From there the Oak Lodge/Timmer property line ran eastward from the lakeshore to County Trunk Highway Z meandering along a strip of land fifty feet wide which followed the center line of Cedar Creek from the outlet dam at Big Cedar until somewhere in the swamps on the other side of the county trunk. This particular strip of land had originally belonged to something called the Cedar Lake Hydraulic Company which had built a little sawmill at the side of Highway Z. A second dam on Cedar Creek was but halfway to the lake from which a mill race brought water to the sawmill. The second dam, now a waterfall, and the mill race dike can still be seen on what is now Cedar Lake Conservation Foundation property.

Somewhere in the eighteen hundreds the Cedar Lake Hydraulic Company finished cutting down the local timber and went out of business. My grandmother bought the deed that followed the creek and, in doing so, marooned that little triangle of Timmer property on the north side. A solemn agreement was then reached allowing Mr. Timmer an access to the creek to water his cows, and Mrs. Cutler a route across the Timmer triangle for an entrance road to Oak Lodge.

My grandmother, then Effra Maxon, from the Maxon Family which founded the metropolis of Cedar Creek in the 1840's, bought Oak Lodge around 1888 together with her sister Ada and brother Will. It was already a summer resort. Guests came by train from Milwaukee to Cedar Lake Station, which was somewhere southwest of the lake, then were brought to Oak Lodge by coach and horses. Meals were served in the dining room in the main building. Guests slept in cottages scattered across the property, provided with rainwater tanks for washing, and buckets with dippers for fetching drinking water from several outdoor hand pumps. Outhouses were strategically located, most of them of the customary two-holer variety. To this day, I have never found a satisfactory explanation for that custom.

Big Cedar Lake, now a body of water almost completely surrounded by homes of the rich and the very rich, was a different place during the years of the depression and the Second World War - but not so different as you might expect. Many wealthy families, for whom the depression meant little or nothing, had already built summer homes on the choicest lakeshore property. West Bend provided the Zieglers, the Picks, and the Rolfs, while the Heinemans, Kastens, Sprinkmans, and Tews came from Milwaukee. Oscar Meyer of the Oscar Meyer weiner fame was commodore of the Cedar Lake Yacht Club, which used to meet in my grandmother's main building until the present Yacht Club was built just before the war. There were a few big A boats, and active fleets of gaff rigged E and C class. Skippers

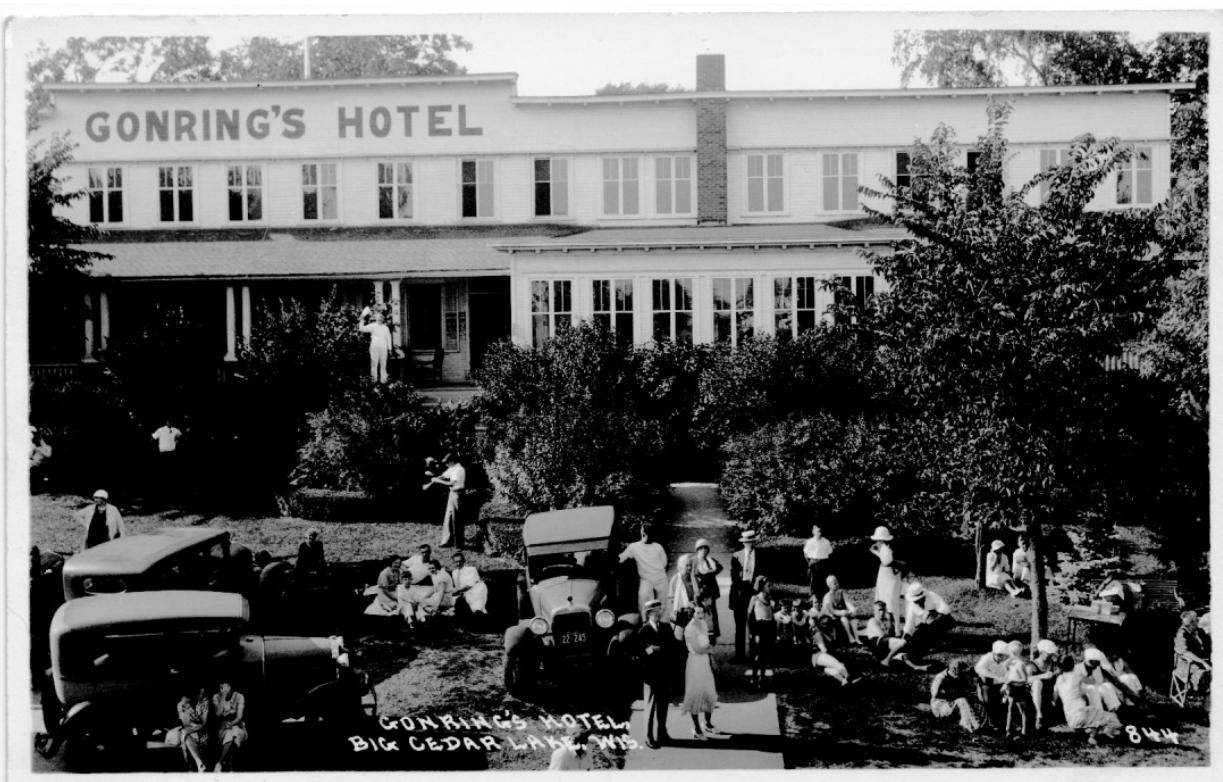


under age 16 raced clumsy kitten boats, which were replaced by Cub boats in the mid-thirties. About the same time the gaff rigs were replaced by the triangular marconis and the A boats disappeared. Races were on Sunday and the club always brought a keg of beer into my grandmother's building. That was the only time my grandmother allowed liquor to be seen on her property.

In those days the northern half of the west shore of the lake and most of the whole north end was shallow, muddy, and clogged with weeds - unfit for swimming and not thought to be desirable property. My friends and I would row over there to catch turtles. Gilbert's Lake was unspoiled, and a canoe trip to it was an adventure into the north woods. There were still a few cow pastures along the lake, but mostly the lower shoreline was lined by small summer cottages occupied by people I didn't know. The yacht club was open to anyone who wanted to sail, and most of us who did started before we were ten, yet by the time I left for the war I can remember no one who sailed who came from the north end of the lake. It was like two different lakes with two different populations and two different life styles.

Before the war you passed by twelve taverns when you made a circuit by road around the lake - something my friends and I did almost every night as soon as one of us turned sixteen and got a driver's license and a thirty dollar Model A Ford to go with it. Our favorite stop was Mrs. Damali's tavern at the corner of County NN and Highway Z, where "Ma" Damali would happily pour nickel beers for anyone out of diapers. Whenever the County Sheriff decided to pay a visit to check on things and to have free drink he would telephone ahead of time. Then all the underage clientele would pick up their drinks and file into Mrs. Damali's living quarters to wait until the sheriff left. He was considerate and never stayed long, although rumor had it he sometimes returned after the bar closed. No Mister Damali was ever in evidence, having either died, or escaped somewhere in the past.

Five of the lakeside taverns had large dance halls attached where dances, parties and so on were held. Timmer's, Gonring's, and Rosenheimer's also offered hotel rooms where people could stay to enjoy the lake or if they got too drunk to drive home, or got lucky. Gonring's hall had wedding dances several times a week, which were extremely popular with me and my friends. A wedding dance was peculiar to the local rural population during the depression when money was short. A farm couple about to marry would reserve the hall for the evening and the Gonrings would do the rest, putting out flyers that there would be a wedding dance on such and such a date at Gonring's hall, complete with an oom pa pa orchestra (usually accordion, clarinet, trumpet and tuba, with sometimes a sousaphone) and,



in the hall, all the beer you could drink. Dances were polkas, lancers, two steps, schottisches, and a weird something called a broom dance in which everyone shuffled along in a single wandering line led by the happy couple brandishing a broom.

Entrance fee to a wedding dance was fifty cents, and everyone was welcome. You got a stamp of indelible ink on your right hand when you paid your fifty cents guaranteeing access to the hall and the free beer, which was available to anyone who could walk. It was an arrangement where everyone benefitted. The marrying couple paid for the beer and the band. Gonring provided the hall and the beer glasses free, making their money from liquor sales at the bar in the main building and from the slot machines in the side room with the door that was locked when the sheriff announced his visit. The wedding couple kept all the admission money, paid for the beer and the band and used the rest to help them get started in married life. It couldn't have been much more than a hundred dollars at most, but money was scarce in those days, and a dollar bought about twenty times what it does now.

Rosenheimer's - another big place complete with bar room, dance hall and swimming beach - was located down the lake from Gonring's, next to where the yacht club now stands. Meyer Rosenheimer, a man reputed to have been able to squeeze a nickel until the buffalo roared, didn't cater to wedding dances, perhaps because he couldn't bear the thought of letting someone use his hall without paying something. Instead there were various and varied events, such as roller skating once a week. A quarter bought you an entrance ticket and the use of a set of heavy skates more or less the size of your feet which you strapped onto your shoes. A man from Slinger played a Wurlitzer organ and local people of all ages would struggle clumsily around and around the hall. Counterclockwise. Most of them appeared never to have been on roller skates before, but there were always one or two characters with fancy shoe skates who could skate backwards and things like that and were too conceited to speak to anybody. We all hated them.

Skating was fun, but when you tired of going around and around you could go out into the bar with your skates on. Meyer Rosenheimer wouldn't sell drinks to anyone in my crowd but some of the older skaters mixing whiskey and roller skates at the bar. After skating into the rest room those of us too young would risk a nickel or two in the little room where Rosenheimer kept his slot machines. Sometimes the door was locked. Meyer knew the sheriff too.

On weekend nights when there wasn't skating Rosenheimer's we found other attractions. The one that I best remember was when America's most famous stripteaser,

Gypsy Rose Lee, was scheduled to make an appearance. All of us scraped up a dollar and

went to see the show. No age restriction was mentioned.



On the big night, after a few corny burlesque acts, the bump and grind music began and the lights dimmed, then faded into blue, and Gypsy Rose strutted onto stage wearing a voluminous long dress with lots of flounces, gloves that reached to her elbows and a large hat with feathers and a veil. Gypsy Rose had been a big time stripper for many years but even with the veils and flounces it was obvious that now there had been too many of them. Poor Gypsy was going downhill. Having to strip in a place like Meyer Rosenheimer's dance hall on Big Cedar Lake, Wisconsin was proof enough of that.

Of course strippers didn't really strip in those days. At least Gypsy Rose didn't that night at Rosenheimer's hall. After quite a long time of walking back and forth to the music (she seemed a bit tired, I thought) she began to remove her things, a flounce here, a sash there, the hat, one long glove pulled archly off, then another - and so on until she was down to a baggy pair of step-ins and a heavy bra. Even with the blue lights dimmed it was plain that Gypsy Rose Lee's figure was decidedly matronly. Then came the big moment. The music stopped, Gypsy faced the audience and removed her brassiere. Underneath it was another brassiere, made of transparent gauze and clearly necessary. Gypsy's nipples were hidden under pasties the size of silver dollars. There was a hush at Rosenheimer's hall. Then a solitary voice called out, "Ach! My old lady's is just as big." It should have been funny, but somehow it wasn't. I think most of the audience felt embarrassed, and a little sad.

Having spent so many summers next door to Timmer's, my friends and I went there quite often, although "Old Man" Timmer did not encourage our presence. He didn't like the kids from Oak Lodge on his property and when he saw us he would chase us away angrily - but not quite so angrily when he saw that I was along because Mrs. Cutler was my grandmother and he didn't want to get on her bad side. My grandmother was a very kind and generous woman for the most part, but no rational person would have wanted to get on her bad side.

Once or twice a summer we would go to climb Fox Hill, crossing one of Timmer's cow pastures to get there - which he didn't like - and every now and then we would swim over from Oak Lodge to go swimming at Timmer's pier and then swim back afterwards to avoid walking across his land. At Timmer's waterfront there were slides and water wheels and tippy rafts which were fun and which would give a liability lawyer sweaty palms today. There was also a wooden bath house where guests could change into swimming suits. There



was a men's section and a women's section. There was also a strategic knot hole dividing the partition which played a considerable role in the early sexual education of the local boys. And, I suspect, of the girls as well.

When US involvement in the war got going in 1942, with so many young men away and gasoline rationed to four gallons a month for most people, driving out to the lake became impossible for those who didn't have access to extra gas coupons. Things became more and more difficult for the resort owners on Big Cedar. Wedding dances became very rare and some of the taverns sold out. Oak Lodge had already been converted to housekeeping cottages which somehow stayed rented fairly well. The fact that my grandmother was married to a doctor in Wauwatosa and didn't need to make a profit helped considerably.

Our neighbor, Mr. Timmer, got along by running his bar, where he never allowed anyone under twenty on the premises, by selling lakeshore lots along Uncle Dick's Road from time to time, and by letting people camp along his lakefront for a fee. With men away at war, many young women had gone to work in the war plants in Milwaukee. In the summer groups of them, usually in their late teens would pool their vacations and rent a place on the

lake for a week - or maybe pitch a tent at Timmers. The young men of their age were away in the army, so some of the girls, probably in desperation, would turn to the local boys who were too young to get into uniform. When a group of these girls showed up at the lake the news, and their location, spread among us like wildfire. And so, my last and most poignant memory of Timmer's in those days is of a June night in 1943 when Old Man Timmer pulled fifteen year old me out of an older girl's tent on his property just in time to rescue me from the terrifying situation that I didn't know what I was supposed to do next.

And then before long, came the US Navy and flying and after that the rest of the world.

Joseph Cutler Diedrich (born 7/18/1927) entered the Navy in 1949 after graduating from Rollins College. He married and moved to Rabat Morocco and flew as a hurricane hunter pilot. After a stint at the Pensacola naval base, and the birth of a son, he resided in Peru, and then on to Lebanon, California, Spain, and British Columbia. He retired from Pan Am Airlines as a pilot. After the birth of Joseph Diedrich Jr., he had three more daughters and four grandchildren. Joe returned to Big Cedar Lake and died in West Bend on 7/2/2017.