



Lake Catherine by David A. Myers

Looking back, I can identify a number of occasions in childhood that I'd label 'major events.' I'm sure we all can. For example, one was when mosquito control launched the annual springtime assault on the Jefferson Parish bloodsuckers and sent the fogging trucks into the neighborhoods. The kids would mount their twenty-inch bicycles and follow the truck for its entire run through the neighborhood. We'd duck in and out of the blinding 'fog,' often crashing into fellow cyclists. By the time we'd go home our parents would send us directly to the tub, covered with a coat of some kind of greasy substance. I remember the sheen atop the bath water after I washed, dried and pulled the plug. No one seemed to care that the trucks were spraying clouds of DDT. They controlled the mosquito population quite effectively back then.

Another major event in the neighborhood was the annual broadcast of *The Wizard of Oz*. Kids would make advance plans to watch it in groups, or to have supper and baths accomplished well before the airing along with popcorn at the ready. It was a grand event.

For our family, the major event of major events was our occasional weekend trip to Lake Catherine. This was the one most anticipated every year. It was always the same group who went: of course, my Mom and Dad, my grandma and grandpa, my younger sister Judy and me, and my Aunt

Ramona and Uncle Bill, who weren't much older than me. We'd pack into Grandpa's Valiant and drive out Chef Menteur Highway to the lake.

U.S. Hwy 90 heads east toward the Mississippi Gulf Coast. A portion of the highway treks in two lanes across a small and thin piece of dry land that separates Lake Ponchartrain and Lake Catherine. The land is, in effect, an island that separates eastern New Orleans and Slidell, Louisiana. Two passes flow on each end of the island connecting Ponchartrain and Lake Borgne. Adjacent to Lake Borgne is the Gulf of Mexico. Our beloved Lake Catherine sits between the two larger lakes.

There were camps, structures built on pilings over the water, on both sides of the highway. Ours was on the Lake Catherine side. We'd park on side of the highway. There was no driveway at 'our' camp. We'd walk across a pier to get to the camp. At that point it became a house. Living room and den, bedrooms, kitchen and a large screened veranda on the lake side. From there a long pier extended what seemed like a quarter-mile out. That pier was to be our weekend playground, and what a playground it was.

Judy and I never had to be told to start baiting the crab nets. Our parents had stopped at A&P and loaded up on chicken wings and necks and this is what we immediately began tying into the nets. The nets were round, the netting attached to a wire hoop that was about as big around as a basketball hoop. We lined both sides of the pier, the nets about twelve feet apart down the entire length. Now it was time to wait for that all important first net-check that would serve as an indication as to what kind of haul to expect over the course of the day. Meanwhile, we headed into the

veranda to retrieve the cane poles that were stored there year round.

The rest of the group spent time preparing the camp for a night of camping. Food was carried from the car and placed into cabinets and into the refrigerator. My dad and Bill hauled in an ice chest. On one of my subsequent checks of the refrigerator I spied what must have been at least three cases of Falstaff beer. The men went back down the short pier, to the car, and hauled whatever else had been loaded in the trunk of the Valiant. My mom, grandma and Ramona began making beds and deciding sleeping assignments. Grandpa set up the burner and pot that would be used that evening to boil our catch of blue crabs.

We were not disappointed with our first check of the crab nets. The technique of pulling the nets was second nature to us. The trick is to pull fast enough and steady enough so that the weight of the crabs allows the netting to cup, thus allowing no hope of escape for the fiddling crustaceans. Once out of the water, we'd pull the nets to the deck of the pier and dump the crabs into the hampers our Bill had placed every so often from one end to the other. The expectations for the day – the crabs are fat and plentiful. There would be good eating tonight. We delivered the report to Dad and Grandpa, who passed it on to Mom and Grandma.

It was decided that we were going to need more Zatarain's crab boil, onions and lemons. A run to Winn Dixie in Slidell would be necessary. Dad and Grandpa made the trip into town while my sister and I continued reaping our harvest of fat blue crabs.

“It must have been a good while since these crabs have tasted a chicken neck!”

Before the men got back, and they were gone a while, we had pulled in what seemed like more than enough crabs for *two* evenings. We eased off on the crabbing and sat in the sun fishing with cane poles off the pier. The fishing wasn't great but it wasn't bad either. We caught several catfish and more than a few croakers. Whenever one of us kids would snag a catfish we'd have Bill get it off the hook for us. We were afraid of getting stung.

“These croakers make for some good eating. Keep on catching them as long as they bite. I'll fry 'em up tonight,” Bill said. “We'll keep the bigger catfish, too.”

So, we kept at it for a while. When it got too hot we quit and laid in the hammocks on the veranda. There was a nice breeze and the smell of the nearby Gulf of Mexico was relaxing. We were both asleep when Dad and Grandpa got back.

That afternoon we took the skiff out into the lake. The lake was smooth and the skiff, with its little outboard, had no trouble negotiating its way. We fished a little and my uncle caught a flying fish. I hadn't been sure that these things really existed until he pulled it in. It had little wings, actually fins, that apparently allowed it to soar above the surface of the water. He put it back into the lake and it swam away.

We stopped at Fort Pike and docked the skiff. Fort Pike was an old brick structure built about two hundred years ago and was preserved well enough to allow the public to visit. Judy and I always counted on stopping at the fort as part of our weekend extravaganza. We'd run through the tunnels

and peer out of the cannon ports. Most of the cannon ports had metal rings embedded into the brick. Dad had explained once that they were for chaining the cannons so that when they fired, they wouldn't roll back. Bill, on the other hand, told us that they were there to chain prisoners.

"A lot of them died chained to the wall, right here. Their ghosts are still here in these tunnels. They're probably looking at us right now."

We would eventually reach the top wall where we'd gaze out over the Rigolets Pass. Defending the pass, which led from the gulf into Lake Ponchartrain, was Fort Pike's original purpose, way back when.

Supper that evening was a feast. Besides the crabs, we dug into a pile of fried croaker and catfish. I still feel that very few things on this planet taste as good as crabmeat. The work picking it out of the shell is worth it, as messy as it can be. As a boy, I had a habit of shaking the water off of my hands as I pried open and picked the crabs. Anyone sitting close usually got a good spray. I remember my Dad getting aggravated and laying a dish towel next to me.

"Here. Use this!"

The towel didn't completely solve the problem, but it helped.

Sunday morning meant more crabbing. My grandpa wanted a couple of hampers to take home on ice. We collected them quickly, did a little more fishing, and then were recruited to help pack and load the Valiant. As we always did, Judy and I picked a few "baby" crabs for ourselves to take home as 'pets.' We put them in a bucket halfway full of

Lake Catherine saltish water. These set a new record. They lived for four days in their bucket in our garage.

Hurricane Camille took the camp. Our weekends on Lake Catherine became a thing of the past and have evolved into wonderful memories. At one point the family loaded up in yet a newer Valiant with the intention of checking out another camp. This one turned out to be on a crowded bayou somewhere. Definitely not Lake 'Catherine-ish.'

When we pulled up the first thing my Dad and Bill did was cast lines into the bayou to check the fishing. It wasn't good. My Dad got hooked on the bottom and after tugging for a while pulled up an oyster. He took out his pocket knife, shucked it right there on the pier and ate it.

Funny the things we remember.

Lake Catherine is a short memoir by David A. Myers

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