

Mash

To people living on the west side of Mashapaug Pond, especially to the kids, it was “Mash.” In the late 30s, 40s, and the first half of the 50s, Mash was the principle source of recreation and adventure. (A good imagination played an integral part of the adventures!) Most of the children and adults in the area between the pond to the east, Niantic Avenue to the west, the railroad tracks to the north, and Reservoir Avenue to the south, derived some type of pleasure from the pond.

Looking back from a child’s perspective, we will start from springtime. In early spring yellow perch was the catch of the day. Somewhere near the pond you could cut a pole, attach a string with a hook, add a cork with a thin stick through the middle for a dobber, and you had a good fishing pole. Worms were plentiful around certain parts of the pond, particularly at the end of Van Zandt Street where the storm drains from Hamburg and Pacific Avenues emptied into the pond. We would look for a gentleman by the name of McKenna who fished the area, and fish close (not too close) to him, since he always seemed to know the good spots. Carp was also fished for, usually with a hand line and sinker, dough or moistened bread shaped like an egg was usually used, also worms. Many hours were spent fishing in spring and summer.

Then there was the game of cowboys and Indians. Some of the kids had a Native American parent or grandparent, so the cowboys (Hopalong Cassidy, Tom Mix, Gene Autry, Lone Ranger) sometimes lost the battle. Sometimes just the hiking along the pond, skipping flat rocks, running and exploring was great, usually a dog or two accompanied the explorers. Rock throwing was a constant and competitive act. Empty

bottles were tossed out in the pond near the dump, and rocks were thrown to see who could hit each bottle first. Also rats were fair game. Besides accuracy, distance was also competitive. This activity contributed to improving throwing skills in baseball.

After the advent of World War II, it was natural to shoot imaginary Nazis and Japanese. Imagination played a great part in these games and activities, since there was no T.V, just Walter Winchel or the Lone Ranger on the radio and the occasional movie at the Capital Theatre, which always had news clips of the war.

Most of the shoreline of the pond's west side had open space or a path, the exceptions being Hulls Dump at the end of Pacific Avenue and the Enamel Works as it was referred to (also a possible polluter of the pond.) The debris from the former building covered the banks of the pond. There was private property between the ball field and the dog pound (now the rear of Job Lot.)

Another source of enjoyment was a rope swing. This was located at a steep embankment next to the aforementioned dump. A long rope was tied to a high branch on an oak tree which hung over the water. The rope was thrown out over the water, then you would leap to it on its return to the embankment and swing out over the water. Naturally, this was accompanied by a Tarzan (Johnny Wiessmuller) yell. Then, of course, in the spring there were the countless games of baseball and other versions played at the (Mash) field, which is still adjacent to the pond. It can be noted that school interfered with all of these activities!

Summer was when most of the action occurred in and around the pond. Naturally, swimming first, there were two principle swimming spots. One was a small beach which

was near Pleasant View Ave., a short dirt road with several single-family homes. The other area was next to the ball field. This was a large beach, sandy and at times with a lifeguard. This beach attracted the most people.

It can be noted that the pond water was always a dense green from at least the 30s and 40s to present. You could rarely see your hand in front of you while swimming under water. Gorham, Enamel Works, and various shoreline dumps contributed to the pollution. At the time it was said the green was an algae. It was said that the city tested the water and found it safe to swim. If today's testing standards were used back then, swimming would not have been allowed.

Another favorite activity was building a raft. Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn were required reading in school. So naturally, the pond became our Mississippi River. Rafts were constructed from surrounding planks. Two-by-fours and scraps of wood fastened with odd-sized nails, rope, and enthusiasm. The pond was well-covered during these adventures. Sometimes, on the other side of Mash near the cove in back of Gorham's, swimming would be done sans bathing suit from the raft. It was not unusual for someone to swim across the pond and back. Naturally the (Tarzan) swing got a lot of use. On hot days after a swim, sitting in the shade by the pond, games were played, jackknife (everyone had one) card games, hilojack, knuckles, etc.

When fall arrived and school started, time around Mash was reduced, but some activities were still enjoyed. Football at mash Field, the "Tarzan" swing, rock throwing, exploring, etc. Several homes near the pond had fruit trees and grape vines, all ripened in the fall so naturally they had to be picked, or a better word raided, not stolen.

Winter, a time for more enjoyment, and not-so-intelligent use of the pond. When the first ice appeared, it was “I dare you” time, that is to run out on the ice, have it break or bend and run back to the shore. This was known as “running bendies.” It goes without saying this was foolish and dangerous. It did, however, indicate who was the most daring, and who ended up the wettest. Many times this was on our way to school, therefore many of us went to school with wet shoes and pants.

Once the ice became safe, late afternoons and weekends were spent skating or playing hockey. Most parents, grandparents, and relatives skated, so most skate worn by us were hand-me-downs. If you didn’t have a hockey stick, then any long stick would do. The warm-up fire on shore was present often, particularly on weekend evenings. Many adults skated, some very well. All ages took part, five-year-olds to grandparents, sometimes three generations were on the ice at once. There was some sledding on the ice, but most of that was done on hills within the surrounding neighborhood.

There were ice boats, our homemade contraptions. This again was done with scrap wood, nails, rope, the blades from discarded skates, and a sheet or canvas. Some were better built or more sophisticated, made by older boys. The others were made of a plank or board five to six feet, with a two-by-four fastened to the bottom and to the rear of the plank. It was longer than the front two-by-four. The front one was held to the plank with a large spike or piece of metal so that it could swivel. Both pieces had skate blades nailed to the ends. Rope was attached to the front for steering. Two kids would sit on this, one steering, one holding the canvas or sheet for wind power. They worked well on a windy day, until one of three things occurred, the canvas-holder got tired, something broke, or the boat tipped over and fell apart, which was frequently.

The majority of activity on the pond came from people on the west side of the pond from streets such as Burrington, Hamburg Ave., Pacific Ave., Ham Street, Balch Street, Frankfort, Day, Davol, to mention but a few. This was a great neighborhood to grow up in, and Mashapaug Pond was an integral part.

Urban renewal of the 1950s was well intended, but it failed to take into account the hidden virtues of this city neighborhood. Edmund Burke referred to these neighborhood areas as “little platoons.” To love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of all public affections...the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love of country and to mankind.

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