

Pepperell Lake

Alabama summers brought sun and more sun, accompanied by suffocating degrees of humidity. We lived in Pepperell Mill Village, and Pepperell Lake was about a mile up the road. That mile seemed like ten on an especially vicious summer day. You'd think those of us born and raised there would become accustomed to the heat. No one ever seemed to. When my grandparents, and later my momma had to go into the cotton mill during those scorcher days it was not uncommon for people to faint away, right there on the work floor.

Sometimes on one of those hot, airless days, Momma would walk with my sister and me to the lake so we could take a swim. My sister and I would start the walk jabbering about this and that. The farther we walked with that endless sun beating on our heads, the quieter we became. The asphalt along the highway would be steaming, buckling under the relentless summer heat. We felt like we were wilting and in danger of melting into the shimmering asphalt, oozing liquid into the earth.

Once we turned off the highway onto the dirt road that led to the lake, each step created a red dust cloud, encouraging us to hurry along to the cool water. The lake provided a great escape from the heat, and we'd laugh and play with wild abandon, energized by the cool relief. Although we were free and raucous, we respected the lake and her rules. We never swam out past the rope.

Every child from the village and surrounding areas had been taught since his or her first dip in Pepperell Lake to stay on the beach side of the rope that divided the lake into two parts. One half of the lake, the swimming section, was divided into three smaller parts. The larger section of the three made up the main swimming area, with an easy sloping embankment and a dirt bottom. I loved the way the

wet earth squished between my toes. The remainder of the swimming area held two square concrete pools. The larger for less experienced swimmers and a wading pool for the toddlers.

Momma never learned to swim. She'd sit on the edge of the wading pool with the other mothers, smoking cigarettes and drinking sweet tea while she dangled her slender legs in the water. The other half of the lake, the section beyond the rope and considered off limits, was left untended and was home to fish, birds, and snakes. The caretaker of the property frequently dragged the section used for swimming. He made sure no debris drifted into the recreational area where a snake might linger, camouflaged by a limb or log. Snakes are a part of life in the South. Near the water you are always on the lookout for water moccasins and rattlesnakes might show up pretty much anywhere.

One day while my sister and I were frolicking in the water, a horrible thing occurred. I will never forget that boy's screams. He played in the water with his friends, and they had been out precariously near the rope. Looking back, I wonder if they were out so far to escape the disapproving stares of the others at the lake that day.

The boy swam fast under the water, attempting to stay ahead of a friend who playfully gave chase, and when the child resurfaced, he did so directly under a moccasin. Water moccasins are not social critters. Their babies are born alive and immediately take off to fend for themselves. Moccasins are natural loners and will not go out of their way to attack. They will avoid humans whenever possible. But when that little boy accidentally crashed right into that moccasin, she did what came natural. She bit the intruder over and over again until he became quiet and still.

The real sadness that day, and the source of my sorrowful memory wasn't solely because a child had died. The real horror came from what I heard the grownups say only minutes after the dead boy's

tiny, golden brown body, glistening with beads of water catching the day's sunlight, was removed from the lake. The grown-ups laughed, some genuine, some nervous and uncertain, but they laughed.

One man said, "No big loss; one less nigger to put up with."

In response a big, red-faced man laughed with a crude snort, and said, "Hell, I didn't even know snakes liked dark meat."

I learned that day that not all snakes are belly crawlers. The two-legged ones can sometimes be meaner than the ones who slither and hiss.

Belly Crawler

In our family, adults preferred that children were neither seen nor heard, especially girl children. When Momma moved us back in with Grandma and Grandpa in the mill village *again*, my grandparents were obviously not happy about it. I tried to be as invisible as possible without actually disappearing, as I often felt in danger of doing. I kept my mouth shut, hoping that in doing so I'd be safe, that I might escape the worst of things.

On one memorable day, just another scorcher in Alabama, too hot to do much of anything, I was thrilled when Grandma suggested that we go fishing at Pepperell Lake, the same watering hole where the boy had died less than a year before. We loaded up in Grandpa's old black and white Chevy with our cane poles sticking out the window.

Five minutes later we were unloading our poles and gear from the car. As usual, we spread out along the bank and chose our own sure-fire lucky spot. We didn't dare speak above a whisper, and then only when absolutely necessary, because Grandpa insisted the fish could hear you and would go to the other side of the lake. It was just fine with me that no one talked. If no one talked then no one fought.

I ambled off by myself to find the place to catch the big one. I found an ideal spot where there were several big boulders. The rocks were tiered, and I easily climbed down to a large rock shelf that jutted out over the water. Perfect! I sat down on the edge of the shelf, the rock hot on my butt and bare legs.

What a great place, I know I'll get lucky here, I thought.

I swung my legs over the edge, and my feet dangled about a foot above the lake. I unhooked the fishhook from where I had it secured to my cane pole and fished a big wiggly night crawler out of the sweet pea can I kept my bait in. I proceeded to bait my hook.

That's when I heard him. The sound low, so quiet at first that I wasn't certain I had heard anything at all, so I listened carefully to be sure.

The next time left no doubt. I heard a faint clear rattle. I forced myself to turn very slowly and look over my left shoulder in the direction of the rattle, louder now. There under the rock, just above where I sat, a big ole' rattler lay coiled and fretful. My heart pounded so loud I was sure the snake could hear it. I didn't move. I sat frozen, my pole in one hand and a wriggling worm in the other.

I smelled the water, the sun, and the earthy aroma of the worm in my hand. Barely breathing, it seemed an hour passed though I'm sure it was only a handful of minutes. My body ached due to the twisted position I sat in and my skinny bottom felt numb, but I continued to sit, afraid to even blink.

The long, fat worm I held between my thumb and forefinger struggled and wiggled in an attempt to escape my grasp and the noonday sun's hot rays, fighting to return to the safety of the cool, dark earth. I wanted to go with him. I feared his wiggling would be enough to make the snake strike.

That ole' rattler was looking right at me through the slits of his sleepy, lazy eyes. Occasionally he'd start to rattle again, low and slow, rising one octave at a time until I felt certain he'd strike out at

me, only to relax once again, quiet himself, and continue to observe me and the restless worm with disdain.

Finally, convinced that I was no threat to him or merely unworthy of any more of his attention, he turned and disappeared into a crevice in the rock, and I got the heck out of there. Once on top of the boulders, I stopped and looked back at my perch above the lake. There sat my sweet pea can full of worms. I didn't consider going after it. Then I remembered the night crawler in my hand. He still wiggled, oblivious to our narrow escape. I knelt by a bush and released him to the earth.

Over forty years later, I now live twenty-seven hundred miles away. I occasionally go back to the area to see family. I no longer call it home. On a recent visit I took my life-partner, Walt, to meet my brother David and his family. David still lives in Opelika near Pepperell Lake.

My brother, his wife, my nieces, my nephew, and Walt and I set out to go see what time, man, and nature, have made of Pepperell Lake. We found the dirt road fenced off, no longer open to the public. My brother, being the sort of man who usually finds a way, led us on despite all obstacles. We parked in the back parking lot of a Wal-Mart Super-Center and cut through a small field to where the road resumed behind the locked gate. We strolled up the familiar road, each of us quiet, almost reverent, lost in our memories. I whispered to Walt, describing to him how it had once been. It seemed right to be quiet, respectful as if the place had recently passed away.



The concrete areas that made up the smaller swimming pools were still there, decayed and green with years of algae and pond scum. We found parts of the bathroom structures collapsed on the ground and overgrown with kudzu. The lake looked considerably smaller, maybe because I had been so small when I last visited and maybe due to the lack of care. It was swallowed up by waste, choked on rotted wood and time. I couldn't find the boulder area, and we didn't see any snakes. But my mind recalled as my heart remembered, and my nose reminded me of all that once occurred when as a little girl, I listened to man's cruelty on the day some mother's baby died. That memory gave way to another, sitting on a warm rock on my numb behind, as I faced that ole' rattler. I shuddered as I realized how my childhood had been a series of near misses, then smiled warm in the knowledge that now I am truly safe. I turned my attention from what was to what is, took my lover's hand and walked away from yesterday.