WINTRY ASPECTS OF ~ AND ON ~ LAKE NEWPORT

I was fortunate enough to live on Judson Avenue near Glenwood well within walking distance even as a youngster to Mill Creek Park. Typically, after a pit stop at the Party Shop on the corner, we’d cross the street and take a trail into the park. Coincidentally, this path was right next to some of the most elegant homes on Glenwood, which were located in between Judson and Midlothian.

I spent with friends certainly thousands of hours in that park, mostly between the Old Mill and the boat dock right on Lake Newport. Adventures could begin as early as 8am and continue till it was too dark to see. Those were the 1950s, when parents felt their children were safe in the neighborhood. Every month of the year presented us with various aspects of both the lake and the overall park surroundings. Winter was especially special to a young boy and his friends. “Tromping” through the snow we used to say as we explored the trails.

A vivid memory of me alone in the park has me below the dam on Lake Newport where, somehow, the icy temperatures have spawned circular ice patties, floating just feet away from a sturdy portion of frozen ice, on which I stood. As I remember, I’d reach in and fetch patty after patty, stacking them on the safe side of my ice chunk while I perched on the edge to fetch. Reviewing this episode reminds me of why I was such a regular at South Side Hospital’s emergency room. As the number of piled patties began looking like a Perkins Pancake breakfast stack, sans maple syrup, so did my precarious perch. Cue Isaac Newton. Gravity takes its due and this 10-year old patty stacker is now flowing down a freezing stream in his black rubber boots, thick snowsuit, scarf and gloves. Too young to think or say WTF, I find myself soaked through, weighing 12 pounds more than before my “entry,” and strongly desirous of finding shore. This comes relatively easily and it would strain credulity that I was ever in danger of drowning in the waters below the Lake Newport dam.

Shifting mentally, from how unlucky to how stupid my actions had been, gave me a lot of things to think about on my mile-long sloshing walk back home after a dip into the icy and, sadly, always polluted waters coming from Lake Newport. (BTW. I’ll save the number of times our crew spotted condoms floating in the water, lying on the shore, or caught underneath the waters on some rock or plant, there to waft in perpetuity.)

Not so incredibly considering the outside temperature, my snowsuit legs and arms stiffened while walking and, board-like I “Frankenstinally” moved closer and closer to my home. I often wondered if any of my Youngstown Vindicator (God, I love that name!) customers had seen the sight. After banging on the side door of home to get someone’s attention, my mom looked out and I explained, in somewhat limited detail, what had occurred. Now, the accepted motherly Slovak logic in this case was to have me to strip down in the driveway and enter the inner sanctum with skivvies, shivers and a lack of (What? Dignity?). My socks were frozen into three-dimensional sculptures of each foot.

Thankfully, this mis-adventure left me none the worse for wear after a shower and a few warm cups of chocolate cocoa. I certainly I came away somewhat wiser and discontinued my patty-like behavior.

Unlike this prior winter episode around Lake Newport, many other wintry memories are quite positive, bordering on enchanting if I may put on the rosiest hue. As a six or seven-year old, I enjoyed an easy to get to and post-sled re-climb of a wonderful hill for sled and saucer riding. Was easy to get a sled, saucer or some just a suitably big wedge of cardboard down to the hill, which, topmost, began amid pine trees and bottomed out on a wide meadow with a view of the lake to the left. There were dozens of re-climbs each visit. Not that we didn’t target other hills within sled dragging distance. Although we found steeper and higher hills, because of rocks and more difficult terrain, the risk was higher and, thus, much less frequented.

As an aside here, there were wonderful hills at Rocky Ridge on the west side of Youngstown. A trip there would typically involve many of my friends and these were just fun afternoons for all, even our parents would take a sled ride. I would be remiss in talking about sledding down a hill and not mention ski hill. Somewhat behind Idora Park (another whole nonfiction story) ski hill (aka suicide hill) boasted a speedy and long ride with enough momentum built up that you would go a loooong way before coming to a halt. It was a blast to watch the other sledders taking their turns, which were sometimes comical because everyone wanted to do something extra and entertain others. There were legitimate skiers who also used ski hill. They were a minority of users as I recall; perhaps put off by narrowness and ruts. As we got older and, I guess, more daring, we’d try and ice skate down the hill. I think it truly would have been suicide hill for anyone who just flat-out bolted at top speed down the slope. I recall a lot of side to side on the most challenging parts. I’m so glad in memory that I don’t recall our guys getting hurt but I do recall ambulances being called to ski hill on occasion.

Later, I learned to ice skate and that opened up Lake Newport to its full display of winter time delights. Let’s envision it’s a 28-degree day/evening in January, 1961, following three solid weeks of below freezing temperatures. In such a scenario, the ice on Lake Newport would be admirably thick and ready for tractors, snowplows and skaters. Come each lake freeze and we answered the call. We were all ready to hit the ice.

On the side of the lake nearest Glenwood were steps leading onto the ice. From the steps a 15-yard wide path was plowed, leading across Lake Newport to one of an evening’s great delights and visual treats. A massive bonfire around which dozens of feet in skates were up on good-size rocks surrounding a very good-sized bonfire. It was the mesmerizing feature of the blaze as much as resting their weary selves that drew a crowd. The circumference of rocks protecting feet from the burning wood was impressive.

Now, from that vantage point, look behind you on back on the ice. To the left side of your view, toward the dam, park officials had carved from the snow a, one would assume, professionally sized hockey rink. The rink was in constant use during the evening…and there was artificial lighting somewhere that made it work. There were some guys/girls who clearly knew the game and played it well. Most, were not very skilled with hockey stick and puck. That said, I saw many who were very adept skaters, both backward and forward, which the game demands one be to compete.

When hockey games weren’t being played on the rink a variation of tag often replaced it. The game starts with one person standing in the middle of the rink and all those playing, which could be dozens at one end. The game’s simple. Skate to the other end of the oval ring without being tagged by the person in the middle. Every person who is tagged, joins the original “man in the middle” and becomes a “tagger.” As the number of taggers increased, so did the challenge of evading. To say the least, an incredible amount of speed and technique was on display and led to so much fun. It is perhaps sad or pathetic but I still recall, without exact details, that my personal top achievement in this game was making it through the taggers when I was alone among the untagged. How many did I get through? Gotta say at least a dozen.

The most recent descriptions are wonderful memories. Let me share some others. Lake Newport is huge. For those in the know, you could skate on firm ice from close to the dam all the way to the boat dock miles away in Boardman. And the lake was wide with an interesting and varied shoreline, so you were skating in and out of inlets to the shores on each side. This stretch of the lake was never plowed; there were occasions when the snow was just too high to skate as well as other days when you could speed skate through one or two inches of snow. This allowed you to carve a distinctive path of your personal travel across Newport. Snow on the lake was common and we dealt with it as best we could to enjoy skating through the elements.

Altogether different, altogether more amazing and altogether even more wondrous is what follows. Some years the lake would freeze solidly without a snowpack covering it. THEN, you experienced the absolute, I must say, joy of skating on a mirror. It was just you and a solid mass of clear ice beneath you. Under the sunshine, which illuminated the ice, or the clouds, you had access to hundreds, thousands of yards of ice. Enjoying shorelines and barren tree limbs and winter song birds gave you an experience of interest and variety. The cool air in your lungs, the speed you could generate, enjoying the sun or cloud-filled sky above reflected on the lake…truly a memorable winter wonderland.

Thank you, Youngstown, for winters spent in Mill Creek Park and on Lake Newport.