

75 YEAR OF ERSKINE LAKES- by Brad Tuttle, 2003

In 1928, a small group of residents created a list of guidelines for the Constitution of the Lake Erskine County Club. Today, 75 years later, a couple of the organization's purposes seem odd, such as arranging for mock trials and one-act plays. Overall, however, the goals of this organization (a predecessor of the Erskine Lakes Property Owners Association, or ELPOA) are not much different than today, promoting clubs, sports, dances, and "the social interests of the residents and their guests."

Of course, much has changed through the years. The 75-year history of Erskine Lakes can be divided roughly into three eras: the early days of the "Lake Erskine Country Club," the post-war boom of the 1950's and 1960's with many "summer people," and the modern community, in which all but a few homes are year-round residences.

ERSKINE'S EARLY YEARS

The name Erskine comes from Robert Erskine, a Scottish mining engineer sent to Ringwood and Greenwood Lake by the London-based American Company in 1769. When the American Revolution came about, Erskine cast his lot with the rebellious colonists, serving as Surveyor-General to George Washington during the war. The Ringwood Company, formed in 1742 by David Ogden of Newark, owned much of the land in the region, and used the area's iron ore, water, and woods for iron manufacturing. In 1927, the Ringwood Company built a dam at the overflow at what was then called Tice's Pond, near the building known as the Small Community House (now known as Little Beach Club House). The dam created a lake measuring 90 acres, and its name was changed in honor of Erskine.

In 1932, two more dams created a 65-acre lake at Cupsaw and the 33-acre Upper Lake, and all were collectively known as Erskine Lakes. The population was quite small in these early days. In 1930, Ringwood was home to about 1,000 people, and there were a total of just 13 bungalows built along the dirt roads in the Erskine area. By 1933, the Erskine Lakes Country Club boasted a membership of about 100. In general, members were summer residents only, most consisting of fairly privileged families who were wealthy enough to own two homes during the Depression. The Ringwood Company operated a sawmill at Erskine Lake, located between what is now Mohawk Trail and Little Beach. Oxen hauled the timber, and the wood was used to build many of the original two-bedroom cabins. Each cabin was given an inviting name such as "Cozy Nook," "Sunset Lodge," or "Castle Rock." Sports and social activities prevailed during the summer season, with swimming, diving, square dances, boxing, bingo, trapshooting, tennis, ping-pong, sailing regattas, horseshoes, and card games. Parker Fredericks, proprietor of the Main Beach store and a pillar of the community, arranged for World Horseshoe Champion Ted Allen and boxing great Joe Louis to make appearances. Other celebrities, including comedian Lou Costello and actresses Mae West and Ethel Merman, vacationed at the lakes in the early days.

Up to 1935, there was a gateman present restricting who could enter, and for a brief period there was a sign reading "Restricted Christian Community" at the entrance, revealing the anti-Semitic sentiment during the decade leading up to World War II. The sign was removed in 1939. In 1935, Erskine Road, Lakeview Avenue, and Cupsaw Drive were taken over by the Borough as "public thoroughfares" so that they could be paved. The Borough slowly took over other roads in the Erskine area, overseeing all streets by 1947. Through the early 1930's, the Ringwood Company maintained the beaches and other lake facilities, in return for half the annual receipts collected by the Country Club. In 1938, an agreement with the Ringwood Company was reached,

in which a newly formed organization of property owners, ELPOA, would maintain all facilities and bear the cost of upkeep, including taxes, insurance, lifeguards, police, and utilities. Without subsidies from the Ringwood Company, dues had to be raised from \$3 to \$5 per cottage annually. Men dressed in suits and ties, and women attired in colorful summer dresses attended the first annual ELPOA banquet and dance at the “New Community House” (commonly called the Hilltop Clubhouse) on July 27, 1940.

POST-WAR GOLDEN YEARS

The war years were quiet and slow at the lake. With gas rationing and young men and women off serving their country, some families skipped the trip to their lake home. The usual parties and dances were subdued and sometimes grim. Six ELPOA members lost their lives in the war.

Still, important changes occurred at Erskine Lakes in the 1940’s. Motorboats were banned in 1941, in part because of a fatal boating accident in 1938. In 1943, the Erskine Lakes Beach Club planned the first systematized recreation and sports program for children. The now-familiar circular ELPOA seal was designed in 1945. Concrete docks replaced the wood frame docks at the beaches in the mid-1940’s. The Erskine Lakes Volunteer Fire Department formed in 1946. On July 11, 1948, the stone Memorial Tower (a.k.a., the high-dive) was dedicated at Main Beach in tribute to the veterans of World War II, replacing a wooden diving tower. The most significant event of the decade for Erskine occurred in April 1945, when a vast majority of residents voted for a separation with Cupsaw. The results of the split were that the Cupsaw Lake Improvement Association (CLIA) was created, and a rivalry was officially born.

The 1950’s, a decade so fondly remembered by most Americans, began with a disaster at Erskine Lakes. The old stone and wood Hilltop Clubhouse burned to ground on the night of January 20, 1950. Flames from the raging fire were reportedly seen as far away as Route 17. Less than ten days later, on January 29, plans were made to build a new clubhouse on the same site. The current Hilltop Clubhouse, built for only \$37,000 thanks to dozens of volunteer laborers, was dedicated on June 30, 1951.

Changes and improvements to Erskine Lakes continued into the 1950’s. A steep, grassy hill at Main Beach was transformed into a stone amphitheater in 1953, creating what would be the setting for many ELPOA Days and Awards Nights to come. That same year, the T-docks (which had earlier been home to tennis courts) were torn down, the Upper Lake Pavilion was built, and a second dock was constructed at Main Beach, parallel to the diving tower to create swimming lanes.

The average ELPOA member slowly changed during the post-war years as well. The United States economy was booming, and Baby Boomer generation had become toddlers and young adults. Jobs were plentiful, and middle-class families found it possible to afford a small summer home at the lake. Instead of being a fanciful escape for the elite, Erskine Lakes was reshaping itself into a summer paradise for families who had previously never dreamed of owning a vacation home. The patriarchs of these new arrivals were hard workers who had likely served in World War II. They came not from Manhattan’s Fifth Avenue, but from working-class neighborhoods in Paterson, Hoboken, Hasbrouck Heights, Bergenfield, the Bronx, and Brooklyn. Often, Dad lived at the year-round home during the workweek, and came up to the lake only on weekends.

Many long-time ELPOA members refer to the 1950’s and early 1960’s as the idyllic heyday of Erskine Lakes. A mix of year-round residents and “summer people” reunited each year when the

weather turned warm, and cried each year when Labor Day came around. Weekly Saturday night dances at the Hilltop began in 1948, each dance featuring a particular theme, organized and decorated by volunteers. The end-of-summer Farewell Dance was always especially festive, ending each year with many sad goodbyes. As unimaginable as it seems today, teenagers and parents all put on their “glad rags” (jacket and tie for guys, fancy dresses for gals) and attended the same dances, everyone mingling and carousing together comfortably. The hat was often passed to pay the band to play for an extra hour. Afterwards on especially hot nights, more than a few went for a swim. Many admit to leaping into the water without a shred of clothing on occasion.

The summer’s social calendar was filled every day. Children had swimming lessons, sports, and games scheduled throughout the day. Kids of all ages busied themselves with ping-pong competitions at Parker Fredericks’ Main Beach store, which was bought by the Thulin family in 1960 and is still called Thulin’s by old-timers to this day. Teens could count on a social event almost every night of the week – “Rendezvous” on Tuesdays at Cupsaw, square dancing on Wednesday, “Casbah” on Mondays and Thursdays, movies at the Hilltop on Friday, periodic spaghetti dinners at St. Catherine’s Church, and of course the big Saturday night dance. Both kids and adults competed in sporting events against other lakes (Lake Erskine and Upper Lake played against each other), the women playing volleyball, the men softball, and the children any number of sports. ELPOA Day was always special, with family swim races, egg tosses, bucket brigades, baby pageants, toilet paper races, burgers and beers, elaborately decorated floats (remember the dragon?), and canoe jousting (before it was banned). Clubs sprouted up each year, the Sailing Club in 1962, the Upper Lake Men’s Club in 1966, the Erskine Lakes Tennis Club, with its new courts on Lakeview Avenue, in 1971.

Some homes were overcrowded with kids, and some didn’t have heat or even warm water, but no one seemed to care. There was always a neighbor to lend a hand or to borrow a cup of sugar from, always a spot at the dinner table of a friend’s house. There was an ice house on Ringwood Avenue near the reservoir to keep the ice box cold. Sam Ball, the milkman, came by in his red pickup truck with milk, eggs, and cream. Mrs. Manning peddled fruits and vegetables from her truck, while Bond Bread and Dugan’s competed for the bread and dessert market. Casey was the mailman depositing letters in a few log sheds called “birdhouses” spread around the lake.

As Baby Boomers grew into adulthood, an obvious question was being asked more often: Why not live at the lake year-round? Ringwood’s school system had grown quickly, and people began realizing that the area they loved for its summer activities could also be a perfect place for trick-or-treating on Halloween and ice skating when the lake froze. By the early 1970’s, the majority of ELPOA members lived at the lake year-round. All but a few homes had become year-round residences by the mid-1980’s.

ERSKINE AS WE KNOW IT TODAY

In recent years, Ringwood found itself on the list of most desirable towns to live in New Jersey. Home prices rose steeply, as they did over much of New Jersey. This area of northern Jersey, once considered “the country,” had suddenly become thought of as part of suburbia, even as an extension of the greater metropolitan area. Housing developments popped up here and there in Ringwood and neighboring towns. Taxes seemed to have doubled overnight.

There were a limited number of lots around the lakes, so the number of homes could not grow. However, the homes themselves could grow, and did. Old summer cottages were revamped or torn down, replaced with larger, winterized homes. Every year, a panoramic view of the lake

seemed to reveal a little more aluminum siding, a little less green. Mother Nature seemed displeased with the changes, seen in the tornado that ripped across Lake Erskine in 1989, knocking down trees and leaving the area without power for a week. At the end of the 20th century, an odd, unusually skinny and symmetrical tree (actually a cell phone tower) appeared next to our beloved Hilltop Clubhouse. Phone numbers were once only three digits and a letter to call a neighbor at the lake; now they require ten.

The more things changed, the more old-timers talked wistfully about the “golden age” of Erskine in the 1950’s and 1960’s, intimating that the community’s best days were in the past. Children who lived year-round at the lake simply could not appreciate how special the place was, they thought, compared to someone who lived in a city and visited each summer. The idea would have seemed ridiculous a few decades prior, but families regularly left the lake each summer to vacation at the Jersey Shore or Myrtle Beach. Could the lake scene be getting old and boring? Other lake communities that Erskine had competed with in the past saw their summer programs fade away or disappear entirely because of lack of interest and politics. Could the same thing happen to Erskine Lakes?

Thankfully, it doesn’t seem likely. At the dawn of the 21th century, things seem to have come full circle. Many of the year-round kids who grew up at Erskine in the 1970’s and 1980’s – the “spoiled” ones who supposedly could not appreciate how special the place was – returned to the lake to raise families of their own, oftentimes with a spouse they met years earlier at Erskine.

Decade after decade, the same journey to adulthood has been witnessed at Erskine Lakes. A child grows up, takes swimming lessons and participates in the sports and social programs, attending “small fry” and “teen night,” playing games like rag tag, shark and fish, Marco Polo, and roofball. He looks forward to Fourth of July barbecues by day and fireworks by night, and all the fun and games at each year’s ELPOA Day and Awards Night. There are milestones to reach – the first bike ride around the lake, the first swim out to the raft, the first frightening leap off the high-dive, the first confrontation with Pinecliff. There is usually some mischief too (getting “beached,” skinny-dipping, “ring-and-running,” run-ins with either Mr. Kunert, Alex, or Mr. Nick, etc.). Eventually, he is old enough to become a lifeguard or counselor, which tends to lead to different forms of mischief (anyone who has ever attended the annual lifeguard dinner at Mt. Fuji knows of which we speak). Along the way, he makes friends casually, almost unconsciously, only in retrospect realizing these friendships will likely last a lifetime. He leaves for college or to explore the world, and while the people and places he finds elsewhere are enthralling, he comes to realize how truly special Erskine Lakes is. When he thinks about settling down with a family of his own, there is only one place to look: Ringwood, and specifically, Erskine Lakes.

Just like generations past, the young mothers and fathers of today’s Erskine Lakes want their kids to experience the best of all possible childhoods. As long as there are active, involved, and respectful families willing to volunteer their time and energy, the traditions, programs, clubs, and friendships that we hold precious will always be around. ELPOA Day continues to draw friends together year after year, to go for a swim, enjoy a \$1 beer from the keg, play beach volleyball, and compete in the “taps” tournament (granting bragging rights to the winners for a year). The Hilltop continues to bring in the crowds for dances, weddings, and family parties. Much has changed since the days of the “Erskine Lakes Country Club,” but Erskine Lakes continues to be a great place to grow up, raise a family, and grow old. Just ask anyone with a badge.