

Summertime Swimming

By Charles Bernard

We had no old swimming hole and certainly no swimming pool! What we had was muddy, lazy-flowing Bayou Teche, an Indian word meaning “snake.” And snake it did, through much of the farming land around our little Louisiana town of St. Martinville.

I was about 8 years old in 1929 when my Uncle Desire took me to my first swimming experience at the bridge. Since Bayou Teche ran right through the town, everybody used the bridge to go from one part of the town to the other.

The bridge opened to allow shipping boats and barges to go through. It was from the bridge’s central pivoting base that the boys dove into the bayou. The circular base was about 10 feet in diameter, and it provided a place for us to change into our swim trunks and keep our clothes dry. It was well hidden from public view—a perfect place for a dressing room.

The pilings were large, upright telephone pole-like posts. They were sunk deep into the soil, away from the bridge, to keep boats from hitting the base.

After I had put on my swimming trunks, Uncle Desire told me to climb down the piling and into the water. Then I was taught to dog-paddle from one piling to another. And that was my swimming lesson. If I could paddle from piling to piling, I wouldn’t drown. It was easy enough: Swim or sink!

The water flowing down the bayou was by no means clear, and certainly not clean. I was taught to

never move in the water with my mouth open. “Really, try not to get your head in the water at all,” I was advised. So all of us swam with our heads out of the water, very much like the turtles that swam by.

The summers were long and hot, and water was water. Swimming from the bridge was far better than trying to swim out from other spots along the bayou. The water lilies and soft mud along the banks made it very difficult to wade out into deep water. The water lilies were vines of floating greenery that bloomed in bright blue flowers. But they grew so fast that they covered large areas of open water in a short time.

Then, in 1934, the town roped off an area under the famous Evangeline Oak. When I say “roped,” I really mean fenced, because it was a barbed-wire fence. Someone had been designated to “watch the children.”

This person was a town official who remained on his horse and reportedly did not know how to swim. The water had been cleared of the bothersome water lilies, and the muddy bottom was somewhat flushed. Still, bugs, small fish and small, nonpoisonous snakes shared the water with us.

As children of the 1930s in St. Martinville, we asked for very little. We enjoyed the old, simple pastimes: swinging on an old tire; playing hide-and-seek, kick the can, and I Spy; and swimming in the bayou. Where was peer pressure? Those were the Good Old Days. ❖