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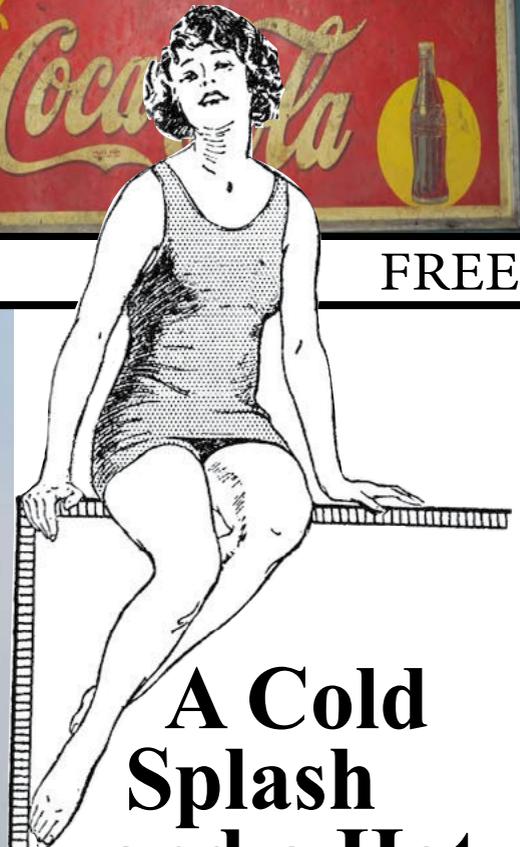


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FREE

Fair Days Are Here Again



A Cold Splash and a Hot Dance Hall

Remembering Uncle Tom's Park in Jerome

BY AMY VOSS-DEVITO

Above all else, the memory of cold water remains.

Fed by a frigid stream that still tumbles from Dellinger's Gap, clear water swirled along a curved raceway and into the enormous pool. Swimmers who spent their summers frolicking at Uncle Tom's Park in Jerome unanimously recall that the biggest challenge of every visit was steeling themselves for that initial plunge.

"It took a couple minutes to get the nerve up to put your foot in it," said Dennis Bowers, a Woodstock native who smiles when he remembers his carefree days at the privately-owned park. "Seems like it never got any warmer than sixty degrees."

"The kids would shiver and shiver and shiver," agreed Barbara Wright, who grew up in Columbia Furnace. "I never even put my toes in."

Although the park's notoriously cold pool, cabins and popular dance hall shut down decades ago, warm memories of good times at Uncle Tom's Park live on. Many locals were most happy to talk about the treasured institution, famous for the wholesome, affordable good times it provided generations of Shenandoah County residents.

Gardeners hover over their vegetables, berries and flowers, willing them to perfection in time for the fair. Livestock exhibitors are brushing, shearing, and shampooing four-legged entrants of all species, while local poultry flocks are mentally culled everyday by the hopeful in pursuit of blue ribbons. This Buff Orpington? This Plymouth Rock? That Barred Rock? Well, maybe...

Canning entrants are sweating their pickles, jams and jellies; practice batches of cakes and cookies are being made and eaten. Kids, excited by the memory of last year's brilliantly-lit carnival rides, are already angling for full-day ride bracelets. Fairgoers who come to festivities to eat dream about funnel cakes; those who routinely lose their parked cars in the wide darkness of the surrounding fields vow not this year. Bingo fans are hunting up their stampers.

It's almost Fair Time, Shenandoah County. Are you ready?

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See UNCLE TOM'S PARK on page 10

Photo by Amy Voss-DeVito

UNCLE TOMS PARK

Continued from page 1



Old signs advertise popular drinks. Photos by Linda Wheeler



UNCLE TOM'S PARK
At Jerome, Virginia
(Near Woodstock)

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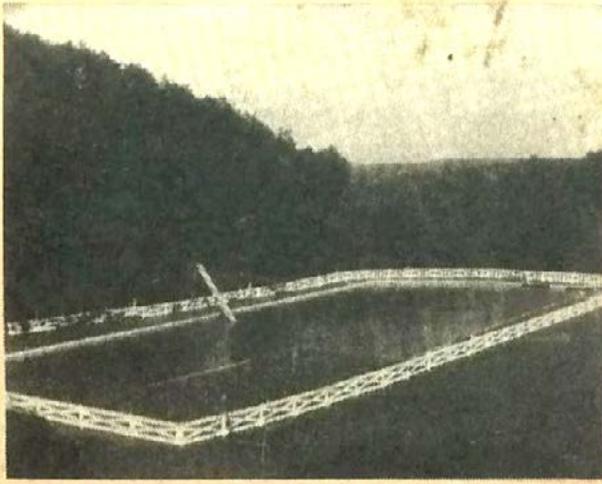
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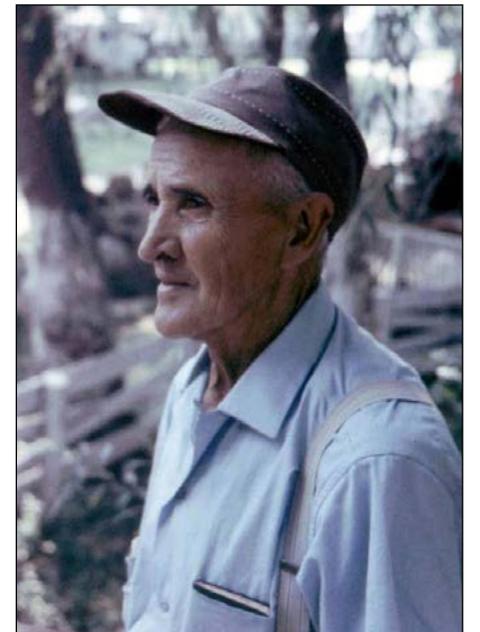
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Aerial View of Our Spacious Swimming Pool, 125 feet long, with Slides and Diving Board, Bath House, and Restaurant.

Vintage newspaper ad. Miller family photo



The late "Uncle Tom" Miller with signature little black notebook tucked into his shirt pocket. Miller family photo



Family manpower was essential to keeping the park going. In the lawnchair: teenaged Ronnie Miller, working as "shallow end" lifeguard that day. Little sister, Susan, stands beside him in the yellow bathing suit. Miller family photo



The pool, and its fearsome slide, as it looked on any summer Sunday afternoon. Miller family photo

Return of the natives

According to grandson Steve Miller, Tom Miller recognized a business opportunity when he saw one. He and his wife, Lizzy Funkhouser, spent the late 1930s in Tiffin, Ohio, looking for a way to return to Shenandoah County. A choice parcel of land in Jerome turned out to be their ticket home.

The man who would be known as Uncle Tom—Grandpap to his children—had sized up the 85 acres with a canny eye. Secluded and green, with a robust stream that flowed through a gently sloping meadow bordering national forest, the property had tremendous potential for a private park. In the days before municipal pools, locals who didn't care for a dip in their neighborhood swimming hole or river were out of luck. Uncle Tom's Park was about to change that.

"All the water was there, and the land laid just right," Miller said.

Build a pool and they will come

By 1939 the land was purchased and soon the entire family—Tom, Lizzy and grown children Howard and Margie—had moved to Jerome and were excavating the pool that was to become the signature feature of their park.

"Daddy, Grandpap, and my uncle dug the pool by hand and hauled and laid up all the rocks," said Miller. "It had a clay floor but in the mid-50s we poured a concrete floor and built the bathhouse." A curved raceway was dug to divert water to fill the 125 by 75 foot pool. Finally, modest rates were set, and before long cars were pouring over the little bridge that lead up the entrance.

Commanding visitors' attention was a towering metal slide specially designed by Howard. One section of the pool's rim included a projecting limestone ledge that was unsafe for swimmers. With welding help from Conicville friend Luther Funkhouser, Howard solved the issue by strategically placing his slide over the problematic spot, ensuring that swimmers would be safely dumped past the dangerous rock.

Ingenious as the solution was, his lofty slide would go on to inspire awe and some fear in younger revelers. Brenda Semones, an impressionable eight-year old in 1969, attended church picnics at the park and remembers it as "the tallest slide around! The slide was scary!"

Snakes—if not scary—were unsettling, too. "Once there was a black snake swimming in the deep end," Semones added. "The snake seemed to live there because several of us remember it well!"

Children under six: ten cents

There was more to the park than the pool. A dance hall with an outdoor stage featured local musicians as well as a handful of rising coun-



The Dance Hall, above and right, is showing its age.

*Photos by
Linda Wheeler*



try music stars: Hawkshaw Hopkins, Grandpa Jones, Les Paul and Mary Ford were among the artists who performed there on their way to careers in Nashville.

Ronnie Miller, another of the three Miller grandsons who grew up at the park, recalls the concert notices vividly.

"The 'upcoming posters' that would list the coming entertainers would be hanging or nailed to the trees," he said.

Eventually the stage was moved inside the dance hall and live bands played. The jukebox blasted on nights that bands didn't perform. Saturday night square dances drew folks from miles around; "Daddy called the figures and they piled in," Steve Miller (also Ronnie's younger brother) said. Occasionally the dance

hall would even be turned into an impromptu roller rink.

This relaxed, wholesome atmosphere made the park a natural place for churches and other groups to hold picnics and celebrations. Cabins renting for a few hundred dollars a year were sometimes reserved for 10 to 15 years in advance, often by pilots from Northern Virginia who had discovered the peace, charm and affordability of the place.

Rolling up the dark lane late at night, weary aviators could count on finding a hospitable Miller there to greet their guest. "We'd wait for them Friday evening to cross the bridge," Ronnie and Steve's sister, Brenda Miller Litten, said.

Another Shenandoah native, Keith Stickley,

got a taste of that hospitality—and trust—one evening he unexpectedly showed up at the dance hall on a double date.

"As teenagers, a date and I and another couple went there one night thinking a dance was underway but when we got there the place was empty. So we went on in (the door was unlocked), turned on a few lights and put money in the jukebox and proceeded to dance.

We stayed at least a half hour but none of the Millers showed up (must have already turned in for the night because they lived on the property) so we left. I've driven back there several times over the past few years and think about that visit each time."

See UNCLE TOM'S PARK
on page 12

UNCLE TOMS PARK

Continued from page 11



The two family homes overlook the park. One now boasts a new brick facade.

Photo by Amy Voss-DeVito



Doyal Dellinger, present owner of the property. The remains of the pool can be seen in the background. Photo by Linda Wheeler

A family affair

According to the Miller grandchildren, keeping Uncle Tom's Park running was a big job and family affair in the truest sense. In 1940 Howard married Mary Belle Campbell and the two settled into a white frame house overlooking the pool to raise five children: Brenda, Ronnie, Jerry, Steve and Susan. Brenda and Steve recall their childhoods as magical. "It was nothing for me to jump on my bicycle and not come back till suppertime," Steve said.

Adolescence, on the other hand, was a mixture of magic and very hard work.

"Ronnie, Jerry and I all took the Red Cross training, so we were lifeguards," Brenda said. "When I was off, I was working the concession stand with Mama." That didn't count the early mornings before school when she and Mary Belle made breakfast for dozens of hunters who came from as far away as Michigan and Ohio to rent the park's cabins.

Her brothers were just as busy. Not only a park, the property was also a fully functioning farm. In addition to lifeguarding and mowing, Ronnie and Jerry slopped hogs, and milked cows before and after school every day. Poultry duty included raising "turkeys by the thousands." Steve was in charge of the dozen horses kept for trail rides. All the while Grandpap kept everyone on their toes.

"On the weekends we thought we could sleep in a little but NOT," said Ronnie. "Here would come 'Uncle Tom' in our house and holler up the stairs, 'ya'll gonna sleep all day, come on and get up, we got work to do.'"

Their mother, on the other hand, was far more understanding.

"Mama had a rule that if we got our work done by noon, we could hang around the pool," Steve said. Although they were always on call for lifeguard or concession duty, it was still a golden opportunity to visit with friends who came to the park to relax.

Miller boys at loose ends also meant a chance to indulge in a little adolescent sighing. During the summer of 1958, Edinburg resident Diane Downey was invited to spend the night at one of the park's cabins. That invitation gave 13-year old Downey and best friend Sandra Manz the perfect opportunity to crush on unsuspecting Ronnie and Jerry.

"They were so good looking!" she said.

Miller siblings had provided was critical to keep the park going. Now that free labor was growing up and moving away.

Other changes were in the wind, too. Shenandoah towns were starting to develop parks and pools of their own. On July 9, 1954, more than 800 people attended dedication ceremonies for the new community pool at W.O. Reilly Park in Woodstock. Over time other pools, closer to towns and easier to get to, opened and began to draw business from the park that had for so long been synonymous with summer fun and good times.

Their family nearly grown, Howard and Mary Belle Miller finally closed the book on their park years and moved to the outskirts of Mount Jackson in 1963. Before too long Tom and Lizzy Miller sold the park to John Dellinger with the intention of keeping the place going, but it wasn't to be. The last dance—and one final freezing plunge into the iconic pool—occurred sometime in the early 1970s.

Closed for years now, the green park at the far end of a winding road still lives on in the collective memory of the Millers and many others who keep those innocent days close.

"Nobody had a better childhood than us Miller kids," Brenda said, fondly looking over a picture of bathing suit-clad revelers who had braved the famous cold to frisk about. "Kids these days may complain, but sheesh! We couldn't have had a better life."

Changing times

By 1963, Steve—the youngest of the three Miller sons—was 16. His two older brothers and sister had already left home and only little sister Susan remained. The free labor the five

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Photo by
Linda Wheeler

Uncle Tom's Park in Jerome— Still Lovely After All These Years

Fifty-odd years after it closed, Uncle Tom's Park is still green and serene. Visitors from long ago would notice many changes; the sugar maple grove the Millers used to tap is gone, along with the bath house, outdoor stage, and a handful of smaller buildings. But the dance hall remains, and Uncle Tom's house still stands on the slope overlooking the pool. Just beside Uncle Tom's house, the smaller, white frame house that was home to the five Miller grandchildren is still standing, too.

Restoring order to the once overgrown property has been a labor of love for co-owners, Doyal Dellinger and son, Michael. According to Doyal, who grew up in one of the many houses on the grounds, the two men were determined to preserve the family legacy when they bought the park in 2000. The past 19 years have been a long campaign to clear the grounds, repair buildings and combat snakes...lots of snakes.

"I shot one just this morning," he said one recent Saturday. Dressed for outdoor work in a straw hat and sunglasses, Dellinger unholstered the .357 magnum he carries. Spinning the cylinder open, he displayed the little pellet cartridges he uses to make a dent in the generations of rattlesnakes, copperheads, and watersnakes that have proliferated since the passing of Sad Sack, the Miller's snake-fighting family dog. "I don't shoot the black snakes, though."

The dance hall fondly remembered by so many is a workshop now, except for one weekend in September when it is tidied for an annual family reunion drawing more than a hundred relatives. Inside, the old stage still stretches along one end of the long room. The original woodstove stands at the other, while family pictures and deer antlers line the walls.

One of the biggest discoveries the new owners made was in the barn. Ten years ago, father and son were shifting through decades of old farm equipment when they chanced upon a vintage Uncle Tom's Park Coca Cola sign dated 1940. Used to shore up a feed pen, it was dusted off and now assumes a place of honor over the stage.

Outdoors, the bone-chilling stream still spills into the pool which is about one-quarter full—and leaking. The pool's rusty handrails still arch over the deep end, extending down into dark, clear water home to stocked

bluegill, trout, and the occasional watersnake.

There are no plans to reopen the park to the public. According to Dellinger, Environmental Protection Health and Safety code would never allow the function of so large a property without regulation restrooms (the park sported outhouses back in the day). Other logistics make reopening it impractical.

Instead the park will simply stay in private hands, a treasured retreat for family to visit, hunt, and remember. Although the Shenandoah Trail Riders have permission to ride through the grounds, other visitors who wish to take a sentimental journey should contact Dellinger to schedule an appointment first. He can be reached through the *Mountain Courier* at mtncourier@gmail.com.

—Reported by Amy Voss-DeVito

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