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West Oakland Memories

WEST OAKLAND MEMORIES

By Bob Blumenthal



It was a magical time, and I was lucky to be a part of it. For fifteen summers I experienced a “high” that no drug can induce. Who knew that the summer of 1948 would change my entire life? I was an eight-year old city boy who was accustomed to the fumes of buses and the clanking of garbage cans. Then, one day, my parents decided to spend the summer in a place called the West Oakland Bungalow Colony. As I sat in the back seat of a ‘48 Dodge, I took in the sights. After crossing the Washington Bridge, I began to notice that there were more trees than houses. I had no idea where we were going, but when I arrived, I immediately fell in love with the place. We referred to it as “the country”. My summer home was a tiny bungalow on

the banks of the Ramapo. It probably didn't look like much to most adults, but it was my kingdom by the sea. This is where it all began - an adventure of a lifetime.



What made this experience so unique was the fact that most of the families returned year after year. The friends that I made as an eight-year old were also my friends as an eighteen-year old. The community was so close knit; my bungalow was everyone's bungalow, and everyone's bungalow was my bungalow. Not only were doors unlocked, but I do not recall knocking before entering. As kids, we pretty much walked in and out of homes without any concern that we might be intruding on someone's privacy. Since all dads and some moms worked during the day, the kids were taken care of by any adults that happened to be around. My parents commuted to the Bronx each day, leaving me to fend for myself. Today, this would be considered some form of child abuse, but in the 1940's and '50's it was common practice in the Colony.

There were three gathering places in the Colony. At the far end of Riverside Drive, across from the waterfalls, was an ice cream / burger place known as Reimer's Rest. It was at Reimer's where I tasted my first frappe, and learned to play the pinball machines. As I moved into my preteen and teen years, the jukebox in Reimer's devoured many of my hard earned nickels. My fondest memories were taking my dates there at night and dancing on the handball court. During the day we played ping-pong for hours. If you were looking for someone and they weren't at home, you would most likely find the person at Reimer's.



During those lazy, hazy days of summer, we practically lived by the waterfalls. We dove off a raft and jumped in and out of tubes. Sometimes adults were present and sometimes we swam alone. I enjoyed getting picked up by someone's dad and thrown into the water. Although there were lots of kids and lots of horseplay, somehow, no one ever got hurt.

The adults built a clubhouse, which was referred to as the casino. Just about every adult went there each evening to play cards and socialize. This meant that most of the

bungalows were empty, which, of course, was a paradise for young teens, that were testing the waters with the opposite sex.

One of the great features of the Colony was the friendly attitude of the adults toward the children. From time to time, a father would drive around searching for kids who wanted to go for pizza. When the car was filled beyond today's safety standards, those lucky enough to be in the area were taken to a place in Haskell called the Anchor Casino. No one had to ask their parents if they could go. We just got in the car and left. Another destination for these on -the- spot sojourns was The Milk Barn. I recall a woman named Trudy, who took it upon herself to organize social events for the young teens. My favorite was the hayrides. A farmer from Franklin Lakes drove us around the country roads and we all had a great time throwing hay, and/or "making out" under the hay.

After renting the bungalow on the Ramapo for three years, my parents built a house at 69 Riverside Drive. At night, my dad held court on the dock in front of our house, which was located next to the railroad trestle. There were benches on the dock and every one from the Colony could fish there. He prepared a special kind of bait that he used to catch catfish. Every time he caught a one, he would assign me the task of snipping off the "horns". A breakfast of catfish and cream cheese on a bagel was my summer staple. Not too many kids in the city could make that claim.

On a spring morning in 1951, I was in the house when my father called me to come outside. When I saw him holding a camera, I turned to go back inside. He was an amateur photographer and it took him forever to take a picture. He used light meters and all sorts of equipment, which made picture taking a trying experience for me. He kept calling me because he wanted me to meet this big African American who was standing by the dock. Then he wanted me to take a picture with the man. Before I knew it, the guy lifted me on to his shoulders as if I were a bag of feathers. A few minutes later, the man was on his way, and I was glad to resume whatever I was doing. The man was Joe Louis. Years later, when the name meant something to me, I asked my dad what happened to those photos. He was unable to find them.



During my early teen years, I spent much of my time on the Ramapo River, before the Ford Motor Company contaminated it. The water was clean and deep. I knew where to catch pickerel and where to catch carp. Since so many fishermen lined the banks of the river, I decided to make a few dollars by selling bait. Worms were easy to

catch. My dad taught me how to locate wormholes. He mixed a spoonful of dry mustard with a quart of water. By pouring this solution down the holes, the worms became irritated and crawled out. I would then wash the solution off the worms and place them in a container partially filled with soil. I had a difficult time convincing my mom that the icebox was the best place for them. We didn't get a refrigerator until 1955. I sold the worms for ten cents a dozen.

Spontaneity was a large part of the Colony life-style. Someone would say, "how about playing a game of softball?" I don't know exactly how it happened, but within minutes, over 50 people of all ages appeared on the field. Kids and parents would come from all directions and teams were quickly formed. The best players split up to make the teams even. No one was excluded and everyone played at once. It wasn't unusual to have 15 players in the outfield. Just as mysteriously as the game began, it ended. All of a sudden, everyone began to leave. Final scores and winners were never mentioned. We all had a good time and went our separate ways after the game.

Going home for lunch was not always a good idea. While you were away, your friends might decide to go on an adventure, leaving you with nothing to do until they came back. We had two favorite places - Lookout Rock and Lost Lake. Behind the now defunct West Oakland Railroad Station, was a trail that led up the Ramapo Mountains. Near the top was a huge rock, which we labeled Lookout Rock. Hikers would stand on the rock and yell down to the people in the Colony. Although they could barely be seen, they could be heard. We often took jars and filled them with blueberries, which grew in abundance in that area.

Nothing compared to our adventures at Lost Lake. As a pre-teen, these were frightening experiences. Someone discovered a trail outside the Colony on Skyline Drive. We hid our bikes and followed the path to a lake on top of the mountain. I later learned that it belonged to State Senator McCevoy. Later it became a scout retreat. However, during the early fifties, we were told that no one was allowed to trespass on the property and that there were guards armed with shotguns who patrolled the area. When we got to the lake, we felt lucky to have survived the journey. I remember a dirt road that encircled the lake. Whenever we heard a car coming, we dove into the bushes or hid behind a rock. It was one of those terrifying, but thrilling escapades that led me back to the lake over and over again.



One of the most daring moments of my childhood was crossing the railroad trestle. While we knew the passenger train schedule, we had no idea when a freight train would pass by. Tension mounted as we approached

the middle of the trestle, because we were too far from either end to avoid a train. Even though we put our ears to the track before leaving, it was always nerve-wracking for me. Years later, I bought a conch shell while visiting my parents in Florida. By blowing into the horn, I recreated the sound made by the locomotive. I couldn't resist using it whenever I saw kids crossing the bridge. Of course, I waited until they got to the dreadful middle.

One of the great treats of the summer was the "spray man". To be away from the Colony when the "spray man" came, and later discovering that he was there, was a devastating experience. The Bergen County Mosquito Control Commission sent a jeep that was filled with chemicals to kill mosquitoes. As the jeep pattered around the Colony, a thick, white smoke was emitted from the exhaust. If you stood on West Oakland Ave. and looked down, one would think that all the bungalows were on fire. However, if you were a kid on a bike, this was the ultimate fun experience. There is nothing like riding through thick smoke with zero visibility. We yelled to each other to avoid collisions. The poison which was aimed at destroying mosquitoes, also drifted into all of the kitchens as well as our lungs. We followed the "spray man" for many summers without hearing a word of warning from any adult.



There were several interesting characters that added to the color of the Colony. One man was Buddy Fisher. We called him "the walking man" because every time we saw him he was walking somewhere. He never seemed to have a destination. He just walked and walked and walked. He always wore a beret and he looked very old. A young couple, Mr. and Mrs. Feldman, practiced fencing in the street. It wasn't unusual to see them dressed in their white uniforms and mask doing whatever fencers do. Al Immergut lived on the corner of my street. To say he was intolerant of kids would be like saying Custer didn't get along with the Indians. He was about 4 foot something, and he reminded me of an ogre. If you walked by his house, he would yell, "What are you doing?" "I don't think he meant any harm. As I grew older, I realized he was all bluster and he became more humorous than frightening. Ronnie Modell, an accomplished trumpet player, often serenaded his neighbors as he practiced and honed his skills. Sammy Weiss, looked like someone from an Al Capone movie. He always had a cigar and he could dance like Arthur Murray. He was the typical "wise guy". Aunt Eppy lived in a huge bungalow that had once been a restaurant. Her specialty was holding mock weddings.

During the 40's and early 50's, it was a pleasure to watch these "marriages" take place. My mother, Rose Blumenthal, held adult talent shows in my back yard. There were no television sets in the Colony until the late 50's. This meant that the residents had to create

their own entertainment. I always enjoyed watching my mom sing and recite poetry. Every so often a delivery truck from Krug's bakery would bring pastries to Reimer's Rest. The truck had a funny horn and the driver loved to use it. In addition, he gave away free Henrietta Hawk comic books. When we heard his horn, we all came running. Old man Mullins often fished off of our dock. He had a heavy Irish accent. He liked me and told me lots of stories. He also liked to imbibe. One day, he offered me a shot of whiskey. I was about 15 or 16. My father was there and he persuaded me to drink it. He told me that I had to down the shot all at once. I never drank whiskey after that. Did my Dad know something? My last person was an Oakland police officer. As a child growing up in the city, the police were not exactly the "good guys". They intimidated kids whenever they had an opportunity. Their specialty was taking our stickball bats and placing them in the holes of the manhole covers and breaking them. So you can imagine my apprehension when an Oakland police car pulled up to the area where a stickball game was in progress. The officer got out of his car and walked up to the batting area. There was no doubt in my mind what his intentions were to be. He asked the batter for the stick, and we all waited for the inevitable. When he asked if he could take a swing, we all looked at each other in total amazement. I don't remember who gave him the okay or if he hit the ball, but my appreciation for cops did an instant 180. The officer later became the Chief of Police. His name was Joe Woods and he frequently stopped by to take a whack at the ball.

I suppose that summers at the Colony were so memorable because of the various milestones that took place in my life. I learned to ride a bike and to row a boat. I learned to fish and to catch frogs. I survived summer floods and at least one hurricane. I experienced my first kiss and began to realize that those pesky girls who were once 9 and 10, became a bit more interesting as they became 11 and 12. The summers were filled with romance and heartbreaks, pinochle and poker, Yankees and Dodgers, and just having the time of my life.

It is difficult to say when this period came to an end. To me, it was so gradual, that one day I asked myself "Where did everyone go?" Sometime in the early to mid sixties, we graduated college and began to find our niche in life. As our parents grew older, they sold their bungalows and moved to sunnier climes. By the end of the sixties, the Colony looked like a ghost town. While I was saddened to see it come to an end, I knew then that I experienced something special, and that I would carry those experiences with me for the rest of my life



Note: During the summer of 2008, I received a call from George Cohen, one of my Colony cronies. I hadn't seen him for nearly 50 years. He contacted another friend and we held a mini-reunion at the Colony. Reimer's

Rest was gone. The swimming area by the falls was overgrown with bushes and weeds. The casino remained, but it looked like an empty warehouse. The dock in front of my old home at 69 Riverside Drive disappeared. As Thomas Wolfe aptly stated, "You can't go home again." However, the memories are treasures that can never fade. For fifteen summers, I experienced a kind of happiness that clearly enriched my life.

I would like to thank a man named Napoleon who generously offered the use of his property next to the falls to help us relive old times.