

Celebrating Deep Creek Lake's 95th Anniversary



Written by: **Dan Whetzel**

Deep Creek is Maryland's largest freshwater lake and Western Maryland's premier recreational destination site, as each year thousands of vacationers enjoy the four-season activities the lake offers. The increasing popularity of Deep Creek Lake has caused many changes over the years, especially in the development of lakefront property. As Deep Creek Lake approaches its 95th year, let us take a trip down memory lane to an earlier time when the region remained a hidden treasure waiting to be discovered by vacationers.

Ground was broken for Deep Creek Lake on November 1, 1923. Its name was derived from a stream located between Roman Nose Ridge and Marsh Hill Ridge, and its purpose

was to provide hydroelectric power for the Pennsylvania Electric Power Corporation of Johnstown, Pennsylvania. Approximately 8,000 acres of land were purchased to begin the project, including 140 farms. An ambitious undertaking, a new rail connection from the B&O Railroad in Oakland, Maryland, became necessary to transport heavy equipment and materials to the excavation site. A quarry for stone crushing provided raw materials for the dam work, while steel bridges were erected to accommodate rising waters and vehicle traffic around the water. After months of planning and construction, the hydroelectric plant went on line in May, 1925.



Deep Creek Lake with Glendale Bridge in the foreground.

PHOTO BY LANCE BELL

Not all of the original hydroelectric plans came to be realized, while new ones surfaced. The first plan to be eliminated called for building additional impoundments near Swallow Falls. New plans to install flashboards on the Deep Creek Dam, which would have raised the level of the lake four vertical feet, were proposed. Flashboards would have put lake water within a minimal distance of being able to empty into the Potomac River watershed as opposed to flowing westward into the Ohio River. Nothing ever came of the plan, but it explains a quirk of Deep Creek Lake. The level of the lake today, at maximum spillway level, is 2,462 feet elevation.

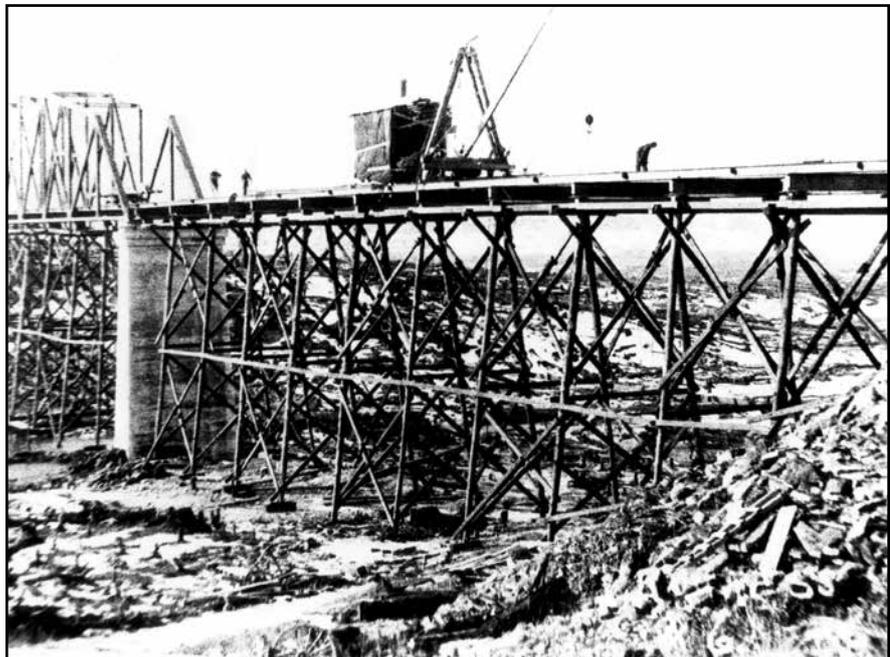
Pennsylvania Power Company, commonly referred to as Penelec, owned the land at least as far back as a line established at elevation 2,466, plus 25 lineal feet. That explains the actual difference between spillway level and the four additional feet from the flashboards that were never added to the dam. Penelec, therefore, owned the water and land as far back as four vertical feet. In some cases, that was a considerable distance.

In February 1942, the Youghiogheny Hydro-Electric Corporation conveyed to Pennsylvania Electric Corporation the property at Deep Creek Lake, with the exception of some excess property, which was retained by Eastern Land Corporation but managed by Pennsylvania Electric.

The extra land was conveyed from Eastern Land Corporation to the Smith family who acquired numerous parcels around the lake including Thousand Acres, Blakeslee, Pergin Farm, Marsh Mountain and Stumpy Point. There later came a time when the state of Maryland acquired property for a public park, but that was unrelated to the original construction of Deep Creek Lake.

The lake provided electrical service to distant customers but offered few activities to residents during the years prior to World War II. Organized events were hardly necessary as the only population center was McHenry, a village settled in the 19th Century. Local folks recall the early days of Deep Creek when only three stores offered goods in McHenry: C.M. Railey's, Glotfelty's, and Hubert Bowman's. They were general merchandisers, while Bowman's also served as a Post Office. The only boats observed on the lake were small fishing vessels, while other forms of recreation were limited to swimming and ice-skating. As the 1920s ended and the Great Depression wore on, money stayed scarce, the lake area remained sparsely populated, and visitors were infrequent.

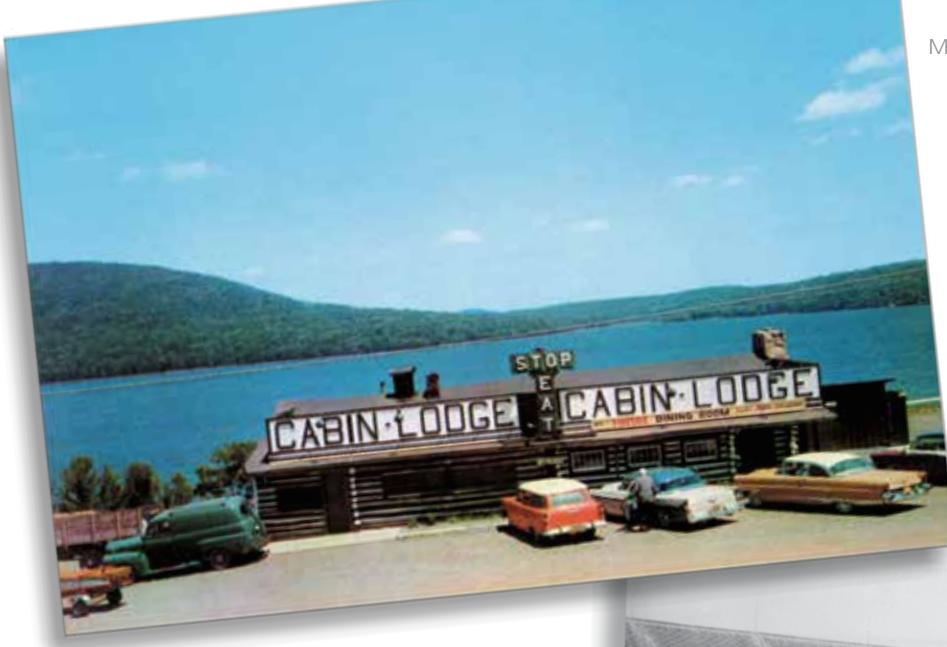
While housing did not significantly increase during the lake's first two decades, a modest start to nightlife began when C.M. Railey built Stone Tavern near McHenry, one of the first local establishments to serve alcoholic beverages after prohibition was repealed. It was also a hot-spot for square dancing on weekends, as residents would pack the dance floor to enjoy the entertainment provided by live bands. The tavern, a local landmark, was razed when the new Deep Creek Bridge was constructed. Rainbow Inn, located at the present day location of Arrowhead Resort, was one of the prominent commercial



Top: Yough Hydro-Electric Corporation Power House Foundation, July 1, 1924.

Middle: Construction of the Glendale Bridge, 1924.

Bottom: Yough Hydro-Electric Corporation Spillway Wall, May 2, 1925.



Left: Cabin Lodge, one of the busiest nightlife spots at Deep Creek Lake, was operated by Eddie and Louise Fry.

Below: Thayer's Barn, on the banks of Deep Creek Lake, was converted into an entertainment spot popular in the 1930s and 40s.

establishments outside of McHenry, at the lake during the late 1930s. The busiest nightlife spot was Cabin Lodge, appropriately named, as it was constructed of logs in the early 1930s; Eddie and Louise Fry operated the business. Adjacent to Cabin Lodge was Thayer's Barn; a typical agricultural structure that was built before the lake was created but later converted to a restaurant and a "roadhouse." Several other barns around Deep Creek were converted to entertainment spots including Arden's Boat Club in McHenry, McComa's Beach on Red Run, and Blue Barn on Beckman's Peninsula, where a summer theatre operated for a number of years.

Johnny's Bait House, located along Route 219, south of McHenry, became a rite of summer for many vacationers. Scarce is the fisherman who did not stop to consult with Johnny about water conditions and "what the fish were hitting." One promotion that attracted customers to his store was "Johnny's Bait House Fishing Contest," a joint effort of John Marple and the former Garrett County Promotion Council. The largest fish of the week would earn a silver dollar from the Bait House, with the angler's name relayed to the council where they would have it printed in the newspaper.

Bowman's Marina was another popular stop for boating enthusiasts. The marina's owner, Charles H. "Skeeter" Bowman grew up in McHenry on the family farm, now the site of Garrett County Fairgrounds. Charles Bowman purchased a few wooden fishing boats in the mid 1930s and continued to offer them for rental until the start of



World War II. In 1952, it was decided that a marina in McHenry offered business opportunities, so Bowman's Marina was born. It offered a full line of boats and a spectrum of boating supplies including Johnson Outboard Motors and Chris-Craft wooden boats. In those days, boats were constructed from wood, a labor-intensive boating material.

Long time visitors also recall Matt Storey's Marina, located along Route 219 in McHenry. Mr. Storey not only sold and rented boats, but he learned to build them as well. Following service in the Coast Guard, Mr. Storey decided to locate a business at Deep Creek and put his carpentry skills to the test. Boats in those days were made from oak and plywood, and special precautions had to be taken for swelling and shrinkage caused by water. Mr. Storey saw a potential market for boat sales on the lake because the product was not plentiful before WWII, but a revitalized national economy after the conflict promised economic growth and more affluent consumers.

In the same area where turkeys and cows once enjoyed freedom to move about is Wisp Ski Resort, a well-known

winter vacation destination, established by Helmuth “Ace” and Evelyn Heise, in 1955. Having purchased Will O’ the Wisp Motel in 1953, from his father, Gustav Heise, they soon realized winter activities needed to be established at Deep Creek Lake to augment the summer tourist trade. Following up on their idea, the Heises were able to secure a lease in 1955, from Webster Breneman, on land located in McHenry. Their new enterprise was called Marsh Mountain Ski Area. A change in business partners by 1956 prompted the Heises’, and a few associates, to rename the enterprise “Wisp,” because it was associated with Will O’ the Wisp they already owned.

The first year of the ski resort saw a small shack with a potbellied stove serving as a “lodge,” and cows were there, while people were skiing down the slope. The Heises’ entrepreneurial instincts proved to be reliable, and skiers trekked in increasing numbers to the resort, including those on a B&O train that traveled from Maryland metropolitan areas to Oakland. Wisp continued to grow over the decades, and facilities were enlarged several times to meet the expanding winter tourist and ski trade. The resort remained under Heises’ ownership until 2001, when it was sold to DC Development Corporation. In 2012 Pacific Group Resorts, Inc. purchased Wisp and continues to expand the enterprise.

Ace and Evelyn Heise had to balance winter business at the Wisp with year round operations of Will O’ the Wisp Resort. As the hotel grew, the couple found a need for more dining options for their lodgers and in November 1961, The Four Seasons Dining Room at Will O’ the Wisp was opened.



Top: The original small shack, serving as the “lodge,” warmed skiers with a potbellied stove at Wisp Ski Resort.

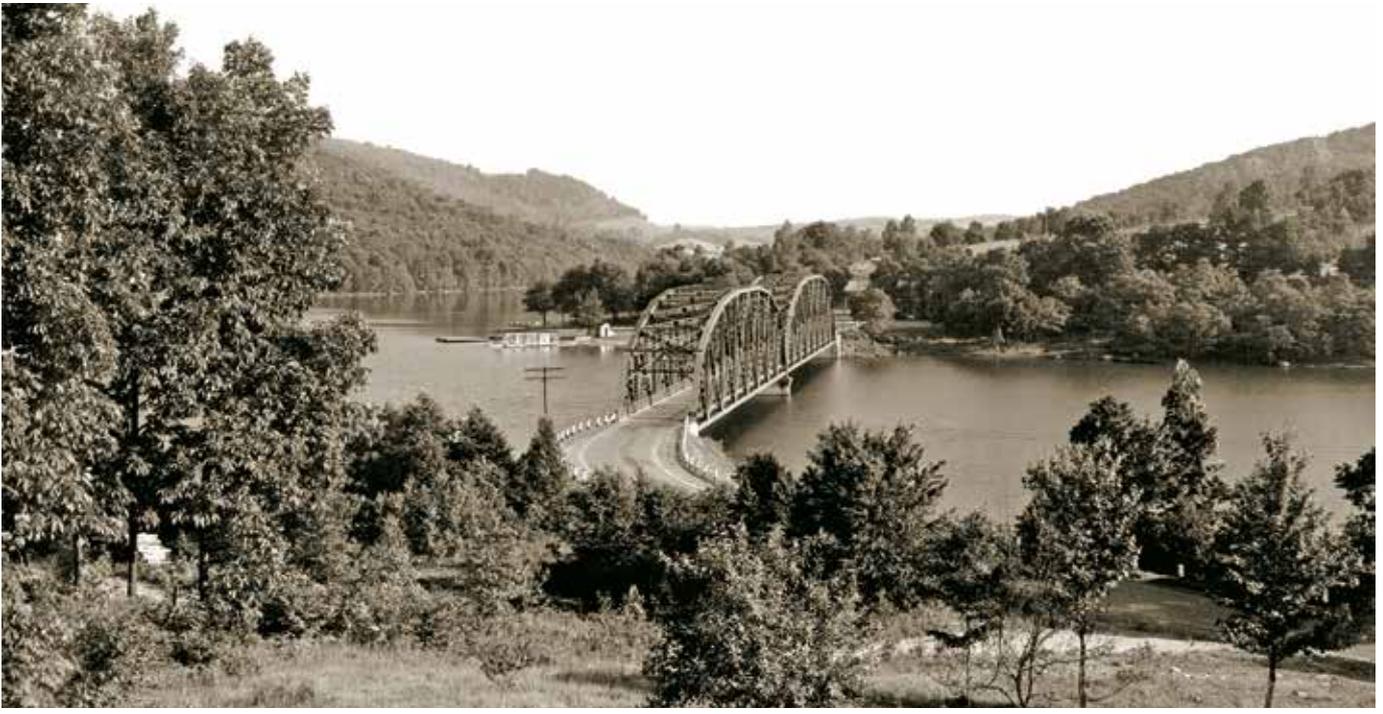
Bottom: View of Wisp resort ski slopes in the 1950s.

Operated by the couple, along with their son Martin, the restaurant instantly became popular for its gorgeous lake views and delicious cuisine. In 1973, the existing condominiums at Will O’ the Wisp were completed, and the restaurant continued as one of the area’s most popular dining and special event destinations for fifty years. Ace passed away in 2009 and with Evelyn in declining health, Martin decided to close the business in 2012, after half a century of service.

Martin’s wife Brenda McDonnell couldn’t bear the thought of the place

so loved by her father-in-law sitting empty. She envisioned a different, more contemporary and casual approach and Ace’s Run Restaurant & Bar became a reality. The dining room and bar area were remodeled to maximize the stunning lake views and the menu updated to accommodate the tastes of both locals and visitors to the lake area.

Matthew “Matt” Storey, Sr. established one of Deep Creek Lake’s first restaurants in 1935. Originally from Brownsville, Pennsylvania, he started the business after purchasing 14 acres of



Early photo of the old Deep Creek Bridge (top) and the current Deep Creek Bridge – Rt. 219 (bottom).

property near McHenry along Route 219. The building was a small, one story structure with “Lunch” painted on a front window. Sandwiches and beer were staple items with local customers. Beer cost 15 cents a bottle, two for 25 cents, or seven for \$1.00 to go. Sunday’s menu was special because it featured a half chicken, two vegetables

and a drink, for 49 cents. Pie was ten cents extra. Residents provided Storey’s with a customer base, and any tourists were a plus for the business.

The Harvey name has been associated with Deep Creek Lake since the early 1920s when Earl K. Harvey purchased farmland from Charlie O’Brien, in the North Glade area

of Deep Creek. The family raised a variety of crops including potatoes, corn, and peas that were canned at Mt. Lake Park. Raising chickens, sheep, hogs, and cattle were also priorities on the farm. While not a formal store, summer residents from the peninsula would purchase fresh food.



Above: An early view of McHenry with Marsh Hill Mountain in the background.

Right: Aerial postcard of a very unpopulated McHenry, Maryland. Left foreground is current location of the Garrett County Fairgrounds.



Creation of Deep Creek Lake took approximately 25 acres of Harvey farmland. Pennsylvania Electric Power Company later offered to sell unused land, and Mr. Harvey purchased 44 acres, thus adding to his farm after the lake was filled. Earl Harvey worked the farm until his death in 1975 when two sons, who both lived

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on the property, continued to operate it. In recent years the Harvey farm-land was purchased by Real Estate developers, while the farmhouse sold at a later date and became a bed and breakfast establishment. If one looks at the structures on the North Glade property, they can only imagine the rolling potato fields that once were the Harvey farm.

Another interesting and little known part of Deep Creek Lake history originated in 1948 when Green Glade Airways was born on Lower Green Glade Road, near its entrance to Route 495. The airway began under the sponsorship of Bill Duncan who constructed a runway to accommodate single engine aircraft. Mr. Duncan established the airway after he purchased a cabin on the property following World War II. Local air service served a dual purpose: to provide sightseeing rides over Deep Creek Lake on weekends, and to provide fresh seafood to restaurants during weekdays. The venture ended about 1951.

There are many memories of the Deep Creek Lake area that help us to create a picture of what life was like during a different era; a time when community was defined not only by place but also by friendships built over long periods of time. Change occurred slowly during the first three decades at the lake, but accelerated quickly thereafter as Deep Creek Lake continues its ever-increasing tempo of development. And if history is to be our guide, we can be certain that changes, improvements and expansion will be realized in the future.



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