

# The Salk Family at Deep Creek Lake

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*Photographic images of Jonas Salk used with permission of the Jonas Salk family.*

*Dr. Jonas Salk, who developed the first safe and effective vaccine for polio, vacationed with his family at Deep Creek Lake for six years, from 1957-1962.*



**Above: Jonas Salk, circa 1954-1955.**

**Left: Jonas Salk with lab technicians, Ethel Bailey and Elsie Ward (background).  
Circa 1954-1955.**

*Both photos courtesy University of Pittsburgh*

When asked what activities he and his two brothers enjoyed during summers at Deep Creek Lake, Peter Salk mentions comic books and card games, but, he declares, “The best was water skiing.”

After seven years of spending summer vacations at Lake Erie, Jonas Salk did what Peter describes as a “wonderful thing” for his family. He bought a cottage at Deep Creek Lake, just two hours from their home in Pittsburgh. It’s likely that the Salks were introduced to Deep Creek Lake by their friends the Wishiks, who owned a place across the lake. The Wishiks had been influenced in their choice by Dr. Benjamin Spock, the renowned pediatrician, a Pittsburgh neighbor and professional colleague, who used to camp on the lot next to the one they purchased.

In front of the one-story Salk cottage, a broad lawn sloped to the water; the family spent a great deal of time in or on the lake. Their first outboard motor was too small to be ideal for pulling skiers, so they sometimes enjoyed the generosity of their neighbors, who had a powerful inboard motorboat. Eventually, the Salks outfitted their boat with a larger engine. Before skis, they used an aquaplane. For the fun of it, Peter made a smaller and much less stable version of an aquaplane using an old ironing board. He remembers once putting on a raincoat, taking a broom, and aquaplaning on his ironing board, pretending to sweep up the lake. When the family graduated to water skies, they enthusiastically embraced the sport, trying slalom skiing and even buying special trick skis that enabled them to turn around, and to ski both sideways and backwards.

The Salks had two other vessels: a small sailboat, and a dinghy rowboat they put together as a family project. Peter remembers the rowboat for an occasion of special significance to him as a sixteen-year-old. One day when he was bored, his mother gave him a challenge to row across the inlet and back in five minutes. While approaching the other side, he spotted a small group of Girl Scouts at the water's edge. After completing the challenge by returning to his side of the lake, he rowed back to meet the girls and "took a fancy" to one of them, Margie Nally. They became friends, and the friendship blossomed into a summer romance, which greatly added to Peter's enjoyment of his vacation.

For Peter's father, Deep Creek Lake was a refuge. His favorite way to relax was to take their small sailboat out onto the water and spend time there in solitude.

As the doctor who led the University of Pittsburgh team that developed the first effective polio vaccine in the 1950s, Dr. Salk was catapulted into instant fame. Peter recalls that his father got a lot of attention in 1953, when the polio vaccine he and his team were working on hit the news. Peter and his brothers and mother received injections of the experimental vaccine in their own kitchen, after his father sterilized the syringes and needles he had brought home from the lab in boiling water on the stove. Two weeks later, a second round of injections, administered to his wife and children by Dr. Salk in a more formal setting, were photographed by the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, the organization that funded the vaccine development program, to demonstrate Dr. Salk's confidence in the safety of the still-experimental vaccine. Dr. Salk also was photographed receiving the vaccine from another doctor.

In April 1955, when the results of a nationwide field trial indicated that the vaccine was effective and ready for widespread use, Peter says that "all hell broke loose." The phone at their home rang constantly with requests from the media, forcing the family to use an answering service. Peter recalls that having the last name of Salk made it



**Peter Salk receiving the polio vaccine from his father, Jonas Salk, while Mom, Donna, lends support (1953). Salk also injected his wife, and his two other sons. The vaccine was still experimental at this point.**

*Courtesy March of Dimes, Inc.*



**April 1955, Greater Pittsburgh Airport – Jonathan Salk places a flower in his father's lapel while the rest of his family looks on. The photo was taken shortly after the family returned from the University of Michigan, where the polio vaccine's effectiveness was announced.**

*Courtesy University of Pittsburgh*



difficult to be a normal kid, and it was embarrassing for everyone that friends had to go through the answering service before being connected to one of the family members.

Interviews and articles of the era reveal what his celebrity meant to Jonas Salk. He was recognized and acknowledged with applause on plane flights, and he was routinely upgraded to penthouse suites when he checked into hotels. He received awards and frequent requests to speak or to be interviewed. Though he enjoyed the opportunities to share his ideas with the public, he often found the extent of the attention he received to be a burden. He would have preferred to continue his work as a scientist without distraction.

Poliomyelitis caused tremendous fear and devastation in the first half of the twentieth century. Thousands of people of all ages contracted polio, and though some recovered with little lasting impact, many cases resulted in serious disability or death. Salk's earlier experience included helping develop the first successful influenza vaccine, which was introduced to the armed forces at the end of World War II.

He felt he could apply similar techniques to find a way to immunize people against the dreaded polio virus. The documentary film *The Shot Felt 'Round the World* describes Jonas Salk and his team working sixteen hours a day, seven days a week at Municipal Hospital in Pittsburgh. In 1954, 38,000 new cases of polio, most in children under ten, were reported in the U.S.



**Top:** Peter, Jonathan, and Jonas Salk sailing on Deep Creek Lake.

**Bottom:** Donna and Jonas Salk launching their newly-built rowboat at their dock at Deep Creek Lake.

*All color photos courtesy of the Jonas Salk Family*

In this atmosphere, when the polio vaccine was finally available, parents lined up eagerly to have their children inoculated. The immediate effect was almost miraculous. New cases of poliomyelitis in the U.S. declined sharply. By 1961, seven summers after the vaccine was introduced, the number of cases had fallen by 97%. As the result of an ongoing international effort, with both the original vaccine and a second vaccine introduced later, polio has now nearly been eradicated throughout the world.

During these years that were somewhat turbulent for the family, the Salks spent six summers at Deep Creek Lake enjoying peace and quiet and a respite from the pressures of public attention. The family's last summer at the lake was in 1962. The next year, the Salk family moved to La Jolla, California, where the Salk Institute was under construction. Some of the final planning for the Institute was done at the lake during a visit by Louis Kahn, the noted architect responsible for the design of this award-winning building.

Debbie Martin McCombs, a child of the family who spent summers in the cottage next door to the Salks, has vivid memories of the years when the Salk boys, whose ages were similar to the age span of the four Martin children, spent much of their time at the Martin place. Debbie's father had built their cottage in 1952, and when the Salks bought the neighboring cottage, the children became frequent companions.

Debbie remembers (and has home movies of) many of their exploits. She describes Peter climbing her family's flagpole to re-string it, Darrell's being able to "hula hoop" on his legs as well as his waist, and the children having marathon sessions of playing cards. She remembers Dr. Salk asking her father to put his Citroën back together when parts fell off, and she, like Peter, noted the hours that Dr. Salk spent

**Top: The three Salk sons; Peter, Jonathan and Darrell, enjoy spending time with Grandmother Dora, at their summer home at Deep Creek Lake.**

**Middle: Enjoying their quiet, peaceful time at Deep Creek Lake, Jonas teases wife, Donna, prior to the launch of their new rowboat.**

**Bottom: Darrell and Jonathan looking for their next photography subject.**





on the water, relaxing in his small rowboat and his green and white Beetle Cat sailboat. Naturally, she also remembers the waterskiing, a recreation that occupied quite a lot of their time and attention.

The Martin family as well as other summer vacationers and local residents were aware of Jonas Salk's fame, but they respected his privacy.

In the summer when he met Margie, Peter worked with a local farmer who was building an additional house on his property. This was a great experience for Peter, in which he learned a lot about both farming and construction. His last summer at the lake came at the end of his first year of college.

When the boys were old enough, their mother resumed her work as a clinical social worker, and remained active in that profession until her death at age 85. Peter and his brothers continued their education and explored their outside interests. Peter enjoyed music, languages, and writing poetry. Darrell, an accomplished actor, was offered a scholarship at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London. Jonathan is a talented musician and writer; he co-authored *World Population and Human Values: A New Reality* (1981) with his father, and has recently released an updated edition of the book.

All three brothers earned medical degrees. Jonathan became a psychiatrist. Peter and Darrell both spent some years working with their father, who had continued with research in the field of immunology—Darrell on further studies related to polio and influenza vaccination, and Peter on cancer and autoimmune disease laboratory research. Jonas Salk's final working years were spent in an attempt to develop an HIV-AIDS vaccine. He died in 1995, at the age of 80, having firmly established his place in medical history.

Debbie McCombs says the whole Martin family missed the Salks after their departure from Deep Creek Lake, but

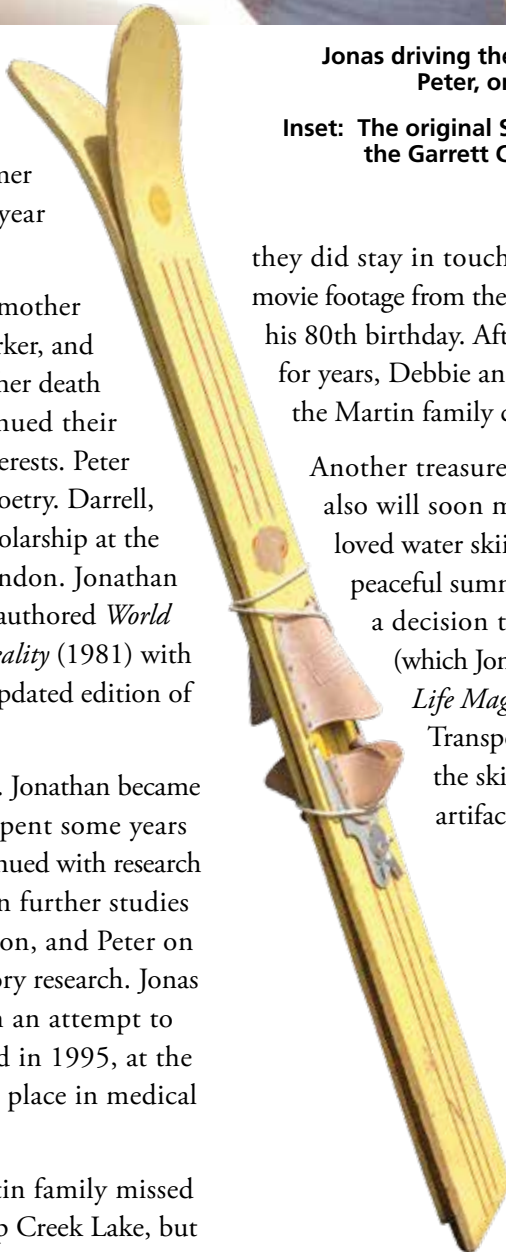


**Jonas driving their outboard motorboat towing son, Peter, on the water skis at Deep Creek Lake.**

**Inset: The original Salk water skis are being donated to the Garrett County Museum of Transportation in Oakland, MD.**

they did stay in touch. She put together a collection of movie footage from their summers as a gift for Jonas Salk on his 80th birthday. After living and working in Delaware for years, Debbie and her husband have moved back to the Martin family cottage at Deep Creek Lake.

Another treasured feature of those days at the lake also will soon make a return. The three boys who loved water skiing and who fondly remember the peaceful summers at Deep Creek Lake have made a decision to donate their family's water skis (which Jonas Salk is pictured wearing in a 1963 *Life Magazine* article) to the Museum of Transportation in Oakland, MD. There the skis will be exhibited along with other artifacts of bygone days on the lake.



**Garrett County  
Museum of Transportation**  
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