



Lake Front Lodge - If These Walls Could Talk!

Located at 3025 Lake Shore Blvd., Willowick's current Lake Front Lodge has a storied past, one worth examining this month. Since 1993 Lake Metroparks has operated this former residence as a rental and programming site. Its ten-acre property invites hundreds of visitors weekly to experience spectacular sunsets and views of Lake Erie from its handicapped-accessible deck balcony or wooded grounds. Eagles, migratory birds, lake freighters and other shoreline bluffs treasures only add to its maritime allure.

From the early to mid-1800s, the Welner family owned the 83 acres of land from Lake Erie south to Vine Street. Rollin and Louisa Welner sold their land in 1901 to a nephew of the famous Buffalo Bill Cody. At that time, Willowick was still a part of Willoughby Township.

June 16, 1850 became the day that catapulted this corner of Lake County into the annals of history. On that date, the worst maritime disaster on Lake Erie occurred. The *G. P. Griffith* departed Buffalo, New York, heading for Toledo,

Ohio, with stops along the



way. *The Griffith* was carrying 326 passengers that fateful day; most were recent immigrants from England, Ireland, Germany and Scandinavia. A stop at Erie, Pennsylvania, went without a hitch. However, after a stop at Fairport Harbor, Ohio, and departure west for Cleveland, a terrible accident proved fatal. The steamer caught fire after leaving Fairport's docks. Despite valiant interventions by Captain Charles Roby and crew, and within close site of this corner of the shoreline, 286 immigrants heading westward died in the fire or by drowning. Many were weighed down in the waters by money belts



and heavy linen clothing. Most could not swim or were pulled under by the mass of flailing, panicked victims. The captain and his family were among the dead. Large numbers of bodies washed ashore. Others were pulled aboard small boats owned by local farmers who were alerted by the strange predawn glow seen from a distance.

Because of the summer heat and condition of the bodies, a mass grave on the Lake Front Lodge bluff site was dug for the 47 men, 24 women and 25 children who were retrieved. Other bodies were consumed by the flames. Fewer than 40 of the steamer's passengers and crew survived. Cleveland's German community retrieved some of the bodies for re-burial in Cleveland cemeteries. Failed attempts to identify and remove remaining bodies to more proper internments left the mass grave as their resting place. An Ohio Historic Marker was added in 2011 and is present on lodge property in remembrance of this tragic event in Willowick and Great Lakes history.



HENRY A. EVERETT



EDWARD W. MOORE

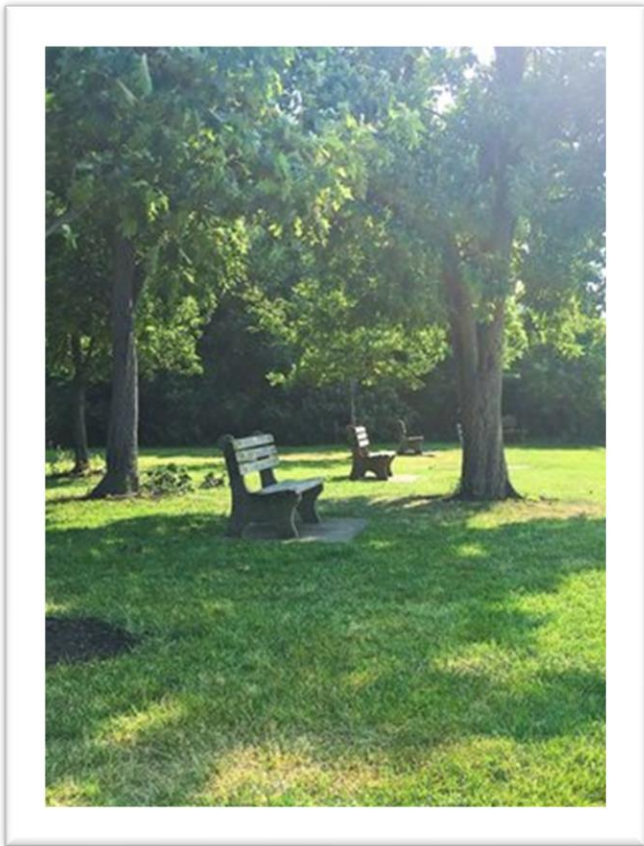
Some five decades after the Griffith disaster, an attraction appeared along this same stretch of property. 1898 marked the addition of the Cleveland, Painesville & Erie Railroad {interurban line} to this corner of Willowick. Known as "The Shoreline," this brainchild of Edward Moore and Henry Everett made rural Lake County easily accessible to surrounding areas. The entrepreneurs opened Willoughbeach Amusement Park to boost ridership. It encompassed the area that included the Griffith's mass gravesite. A park worker was assigned the gruesome task of disposing of bones that regularly protruded out of the soil. (Continued erosion into the 1920s resulted in a total loss of the makeshift cemetery to Lake Erie.)

From 1898 thru 1926, the Willoughbeach attraction successfully lured thousands of visitors to Lake County. The park was a resort, dance hall, campground, beach, coaster "rides." The fun and thrills must for Northeast Ohioans.



and, in time, primitive made the 25 cent trip a This era of Willowick's Gilded Age ended in late 1926 as automobile ownership brought the interurban era to a close. The park and campgrounds survived for a decade more.

1889 saw a second schoolhouse #4 constructed at the corner of Vine and Lake Shore. This brick edifice known as the Welner School served the community from 1889 to 1922. A kid 'hack' which was a



horse-drawn wagon transported children to the school. It had side benches, a rounded wooden top and straw-lined floor to shelter the young learners. Sled runners

replaced the wheels in winter to adapt to snowy roads.



By the 1960s Richard and Ella 'Snooks' Snow started building their home on the acreage that was once the Welner property and part of early Willowick history. Mr. Snow was the Air Raid Warden for western Lake County. His home included a special radio room for equipment and sirens. Richard Snow passed in 1975 and his wife, being blind, could not remain in the home. Their home and current Lake Front Lodge was purchased by the City of Willowick in 1978. While grants necessitated the razing of two other lakefront structures and remodeling a home next door, the first city beach access became a reality. Some shoreline grading and revetment wall were included in 1979-1980 improvements. As mentioned earlier, Lake Metroparks was brought on in 1993 to maintain the current 10-acre park for public use and conservational purposes. Join those "in the know" and visit another of Lake County's hidden gems.

