

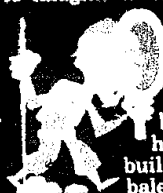


At right, Mick Macklem points out the pilings that mark the site of the Jones' water park on Neva Lake, which vanished many years ago; At left, a ladder from the big dock can be seen under the water.

## *Decades ago, youngsters had real fun*

### Jones' water park mixed thrills and dangers at Neva Lake.

Ever run with scissors?  
In today's litigious society, it is hard to imagine a time when a few risks were taken for granted as a part of childhood. Youngsters ran like packs of puppies from backyard to backyard, climbed high into haylofts and built deep forts in the bales and raced hell-bent



down icy slopes on flexible flyers. Paste and sand were considered a food group.

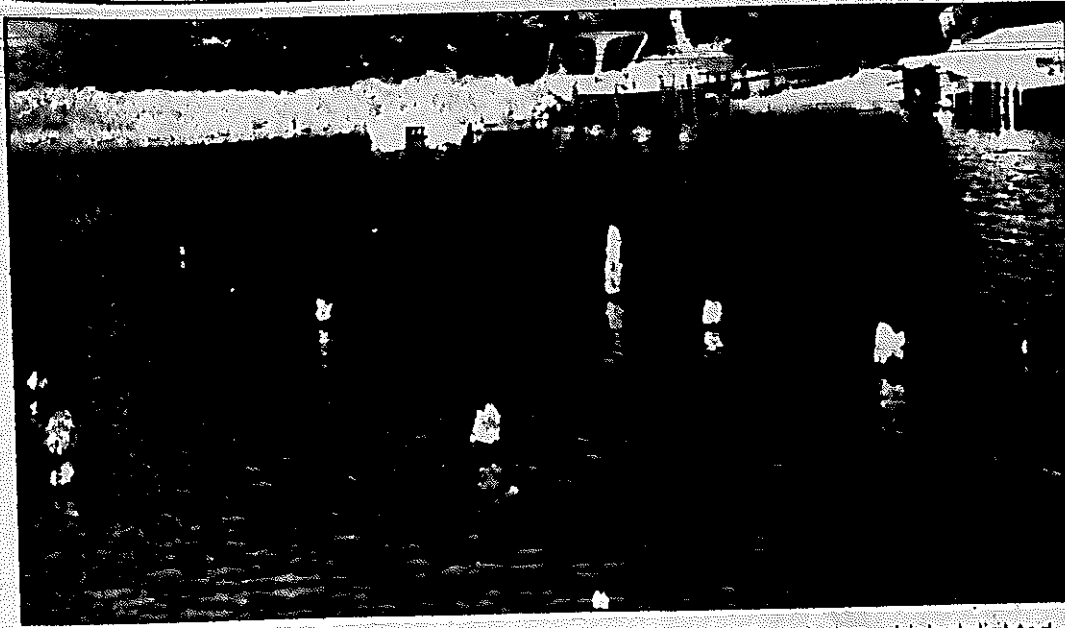
One of the greatest places for childhood—and perhaps a bit of adult-tomfoolery—was up at Neva Lake, where Harry Jones constructed a primitive version of what would be called a water park today.

All that's left now are a dozen or so hazards to navigation that snag fish line and batter the lower units of the

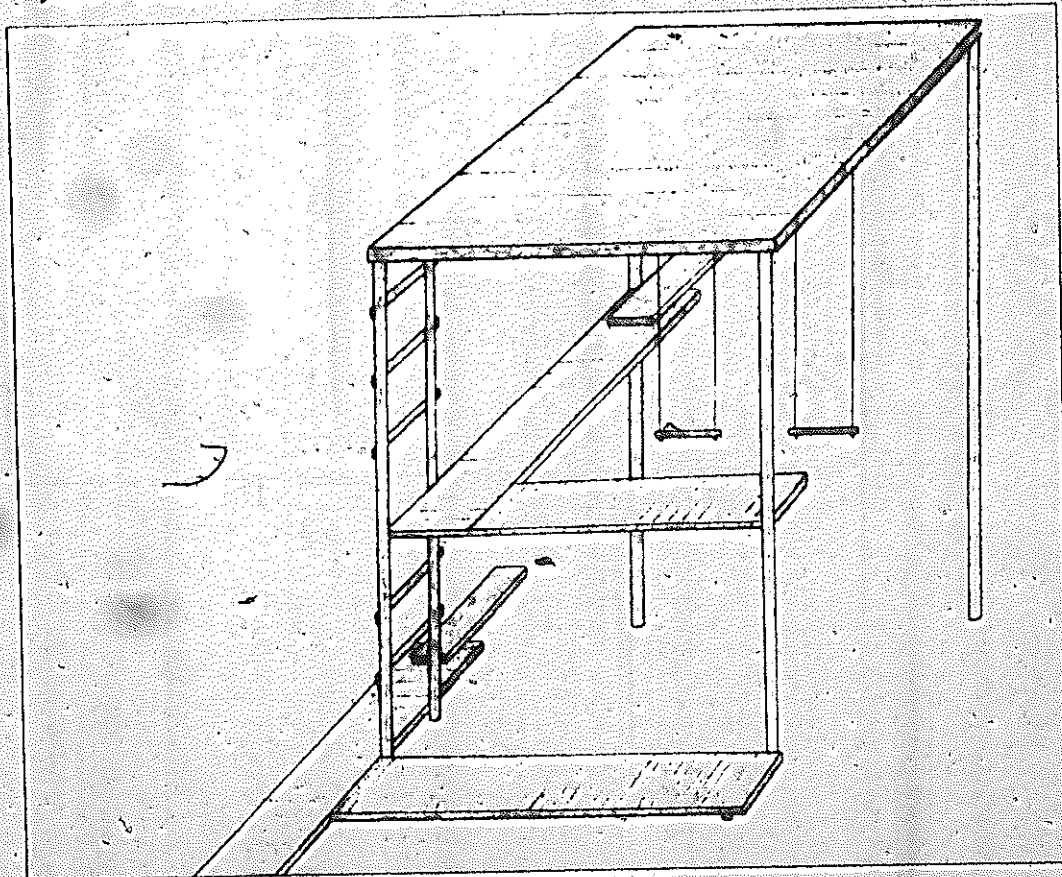
pontoon boats. But usually hidden by the deep lake's dark waters, the better part of a decade of drought has exposed the weathered pilings and remnants of ladders, hinting at the past.

"The waters are not real clear," Mick Macklem, who lives a stone's throw from where the dock was located, says. "We went diving once and just kept

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Pilings mark the site of the 'big Jones' Tavern water park at Neva Lake, which delighted youngsters in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The pilings are normally underwater, but years of drought have reduced the lake level and allowed more to be visible to boaters.



The crew was unable to locate any photographs of the Jones' Tavern or water park, and that's a shame because the dock complex must have been quite the sight. Rob Jira sketched this drawing of the park after talking to Jim Reif, who visited the facility as a youngster.

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## No pictures, plenty of memories of water park

seeing more and more pilings as we went along."

Mick, accompanied by his little pal Lacey, a miniature Schnauzer, measured the area covered by the pilings and figured the dock must have been 90 by 80 feet, a full 7,200 square feet, in area.

It was huge, and in its day, oh Nellie, it must have been something.

The guy that knows the most about the dock—and indeed about much of Neva's history—is Rob Jira, who has compiled a loose-leaf binder full of newspaper clippings, photographs and even matchbook covers.

"I did it to settle arguments in taverns," Jira says, suggesting he's pulled the book out on many occasions when a few patrons of Quinn's or Reif's have raised questions about this or that barn or who lived where, when.

Jones' Tavern, and the dock are tied to the history of Neva Lake, which, according to Jira's documents, "once had almost as many taverns as houses."

Even today the lake is difficult to get too, located off of Clajre Road, which is off of Highway V...which is off of Highway A...etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

It was first known as Westerholdt Lake and later Bass Lake, at the time incorporating what are now known as Anderson Lake and Neva Lake.

Harry Jones and his wife Eugenie, built the "Little Red Cabin," also known as cabin No. 2, on the east side of the lake around 1930. After she died in 1935, Harry returned to Chicago and brought back Helen as his new wife.

The tavern was located east and north of his cabin, and was known simply as "Jones" by the locals, although the official name may have been Neva Gardens. According to town records, Jones got into the business by purchasing a tavern and cigarette license good for half-a-year on March 29, 1936. The cost was \$42.50. He followed up with a full year license, costing \$80 the next June.

Harry had a reputation around Neva Lake as a flashy guy, traveling in a fairly new 12-cylinder Franklin car at a time when everyone else had clunkers. Some suggest that,

with the Chicago connection and fast car, he may have been a bootlegger.

Harry apparently had big plans for Neva Lake. He created the Neva Garden Plat and also started construction on a big dance pavilion, never getting beyond the foundation stage.

The bar burned down in 1940 or 1941 and the Jones' continued to serve beer from the cabin for a time. He transferred his license to another tavern in 1945.

Harry died, along with his big dreams for the neighborhood, in 1954. Helen followed in 1969.

Back to the dock.

Harry constructed the dock a short distance from his tavern and it was quite a structure.

Jira's account follows:

*The dock headed west with a diving board at the end, just above the water. To the southwest of this diving board Harry put in a pair of posts a couple feet above the water with a diving board on it. A guy had to jump pretty hard to get any spring from it.*

*Shortly before the end of the main dock it branched north. To the north and west of the dock intersection Harry built a 20-foot tower with a wooden plank top, used by brave kids as a diving platform. The tower was a great place to go for some of the kids playing tag. If a kid who was 'it' was afraid of heights, he would not climb the platform. If the 'it' kid didn't mind heights, the other kids on top jumped over the edge and swam away as he approached.*

*A pair of rope swings with wooden bars were hung underneath the tower. You could swing on them in the rain and not get wet. Apparently this was important, because you don't want to get wet when you go swimming. If you wanted to swing, you climbed the ladder 10 feet and walked the dock heading north. Big kids could reach the swings, but smaller kids had to jump for them. Out the west side of the tower was a diving board 10 feet above the water, accessed by climbing a wooden ladder on the south side and walking a high-rise dock.*

There was also a toboggan run, which sent sleds shooting across the length of the little lake.

It must have been quite

the place, a kid's (and now slick-suited litigator's) dream.

A few folks around Neva Lake and Antigo still remember the water park, with Jim Reif recalling it as pretty ramshackle by the mid-1940s.

Gene Jacobus remembers visiting the dock in the late 1940s when he was seven or eight years old.

"We used the swings," he said, "but it was pretty rickety by then."

Memories may be faint, but, alas gentle readers, photographic images are even fainter. An Antigo Daily Journal appeal brought no results.

George Steed, a faithful friend of the crew who now lives in Poland, knows why and shared it in a recent e-mail:

*Hello Miss Lisa,  
A few months ago I dreamed of Neva. No one ever had a camera there. All were lucky to have the ticket price. It must have been 1942. Somehow we managed to get to Neva. The swimming and diving was a great part of the summer. Mr. and Mrs. Jones were always most pleasant and kept all in good repair. There were no life guards. I never saw an accident. I do remember the best diver... Bob Robbins! He could do amazing stunts off the board. I was simply a jumper. Off the beach, Mr. Jones stored an old 'Cord' (I think) auto. Thanks for the memories!*

*Best regards,  
George Steed*

The June 5, 1944 Antigo Daily Journal reported on a double drowning at Neva Lake, noting that it occurred "not 10 feet from the dock near the bathhouse, where the lake reaches a depth of 15 feet."

The boys were ages 18 and 17, and one apparently died attempting to rescue the other.

They ran with scissors, and lost.

(Hidden Places is an occasional Antigo Daily Journal column that examines some of the more unique, unusual or just plain unknown places and history of the northwoods and occasionally farther afield. The crew is always looking for ideas and willing tour guides. Contact Lisa at [adjlisa@solarus.net](mailto:adjlisa@solarus.net) or Debbie at [adjdebbie@solarus.net](mailto:adjdebbie@solarus.net).)