

Rich folks camping? A diver set on fire?

By Lorna Seilstad

Where do you think you could find a resort billed as *the* place to visit west of Chicago and known as “The Mecca of the West” around the turn of the Century?

Denver?

St. Louis?

Minneapolis?

Council Bluffs, Iowa probably did not make your list. However, in 1886 Lake Manawa, an oxbow lake created by a flood in 1881, was opened to the public. Complete with grand pavilions, water toboggan slides, regattas, and a Midway, the resort served as an entertainment center with over 2000 people a day coming to the park from near and far. At one point, streetcars arrived there every eight minutes.

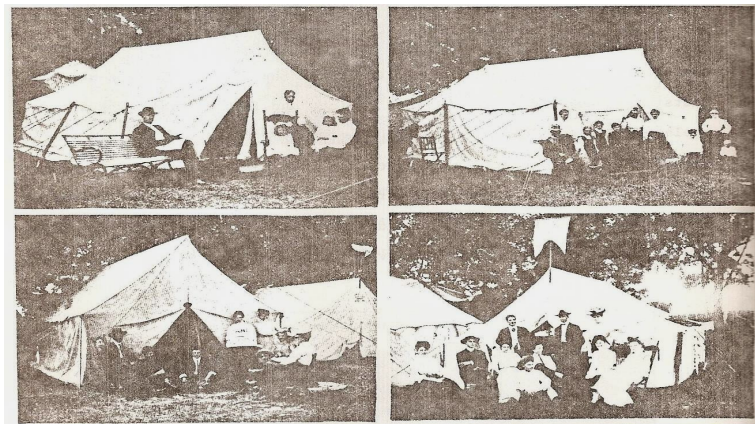
As a Council Bluffs native, I’d heard stories about Lake Manawa’s once opulent resort all my life, but until I researched it, I had no idea how amazing the location was. When I read the stories, I had to write a story about it and *Making Waves*, book 1 in the Lake Manawa Summer Series, was born. Take a trip now with me to the area through old postcards offered at the lake and a few photographs taken at the time.



Visitors enter the park by travelling down Shady Lane. The canopy of trees gave way to a surprisingly beautiful lake nestled in Iowa’s hills. After a visitor paid his or her dime at the turn style to enter the Grand Plaza, they would discover the Grand Pavilion, the boardwalk, lighted fountains, and the entertainment acts provided by the management. Besides the band stand, the park featured acrobatics acts, hot air balloon launches, and dramatic productions. Lawn tennis courts, horseshoe pits, and cycling were also popular.



Rowboats could be rented at the lake and rowing competitions were common forms of entertainment. As mentioned, spectacular acts delighted the crowds. One such act occurred at the dive tower. For years, a woman diver, known only as Miss Fishbaugh, climbed the dive tower, soaked herself in gasoline, and lit herself on fire every night at 9 p.m. Thankfully, her asbestos bathing costume and a special collar around her hair and face kept her alive to repeat the fete again and again.



Not everyone traveled to Lake Manawa from the fancy hotels inside the city. Each season over 500 people pitched tents and lived at the lake. The wealthy brought along all the comforts of home, including their servants. Husbands would take the streetcar into Council Bluffs or Omaha to work.



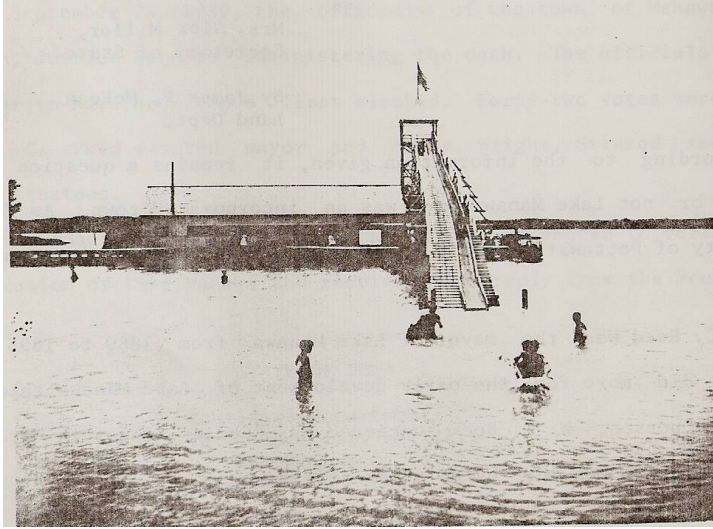
With six miles of water on which to sail, Lake Manawa attracted sailboats of various sizes. Regatta's were also very popular at the lake and individuals transported their crafts from other cities by rail.



While today it's hard to imagine swimming in wool stockings, bloomers, and a skirt, bathing costumes weighed considerably less than the usual summer apparel and were quite freeing for women. They also showed a woman's arms and the shape of her legs so some people considered them quite scandalous. Most bathing costumes sported some kind of nautical theme complete with a sailor collar.



To give the resort an Eastern feel, the main beach was named Manhattan Beach. Tons of sand had to be brought in to create a place for bathers. Col. Reed, the manager of Manhattan Beach, also brought in top acts to perform. In the year *Making Waves* is written (1895) the Ladies Military Band of Chicago performed all summer. They were paraded through the city in streetcars.



Bathers could rent wooden toboggans, like those used on snow, and fly down one of the three slides such as this at the lake. The largest of the slides was advertised at the “Toboggan of Joy.” The structure attached to the water slide is a bath house where the sleds could be rented and refreshments purchased.

In the subsequent two books in the Lake Manawa Summers Series, more amenities of the park will be featured including one of the largest and longest wooden roller coasters of the day (1906), a ball diamond complete with a local team, a roller rink, a bowling alley, and a miniature railroad. Like today’s entertainment centers, the resort was constantly changing and adding new things to entice their patrons.

Today, Lake Manawa is a popular state park, and sadly, no traces of its heyday remain. The once well-liked resort became a victim of tornadoes and fires beginning in 1913. Along with that, the carnival atmosphere fell out of popularity with the wealthy, and they became concerned with the “shady characters” the Midway seemed to attract. In 1927, after nearly forty years of entertaining its patrons, the park closed for good and the buildings were either auctioned off or torn down.

My grandfather purchased one of the bath houses for \$300 and moved it onto a lot of what was once part of the Midway. This long narrow building became the home my father grew up in. It was torn down a few years ago, but at least one of the bath houses belonging to another family remains as a home in the area.

During this time period, people worked hard and played hard. In *Making Waves* (from Revell, released in Sept.) I wanted to bring this resort back to life. It’s so easy to picture the “old days” in black and white, but they deserve to be remembered in color. I hope you will join Marguerite and Trip in *Making Waves* as they uncover all the lake has to offer both as a place to enjoy and a place to change lives.