


## Summers at the Lake



**S**UMMERS AT LAKE Winnipeg kindle some of the fondest memories of childhood for generations of Manitobans: the sunlight striking sparks or the moonlight tracing silver pathways on the water; the haunting wail of a steam locomotive whistle just as you're falling asleep; the sand so hot it scorches your bare feet; the hours spent in the water until your skin crinkles like a prune; the soft, soothing sounds of the lake lazily stroking the shore; its deafening roar as white-plumed breakers dash far up the sand to seize you in a watery embrace and carry you out, out, out, for a wild ride in their powerful undertow; cold ginger beer or Hot Lips on the boardwalk; first boyfriends, first girlfriends, the carousel, the screams of terrified delight as the rollercoaster takes its first big plunge, the dodgem cars, the dances, the greasy french fries ... altogether, unforgettable summer idylls.

But these idyllic summers are forever played out against the backdrop of stern parental warnings about Lake Winnipeg's treacherous, untrustworthy character: Don't take the boat far out into the lake. Don't stay out one minute if a wind comes up. Don't ever swim out. Don't try to walk into the waves. Don't. Don't. Don't. Always be careful. Be careful of this lake. It can kill you ...

These are not idle cautions. Police and Canadian Coast Guard records show that not a summer has passed without multiple deaths on the lake. Lake Winnipeg is a Circe. It lures and deceives. Its moments of utter calm

*The railways gave life to Lake Winnipeg's beaches.* BARBARA ENDRES

usually happen just before it turns into an untameable monster.

In the space of just one season, Peter St. John, the Earl of Orkney and retired professor of political studies at the University of Manitoba, twice risked his life to save people who had paid no heed to the lake's elemental threat. St. John will never forget the summer of 1980, when he rented a cottage at Victoria Beach. His first rescue occurred in the spring of the year. He was sitting alone on the beach in a fairly strong northwest gale, watching two men in a sailboat manoeuvring in the harbour. Without warning, they were suddenly swept out into the lake. They capsized within minutes and he could see them hanging on to the boat. Launching his own boat, he managed to bring them to shore just before hypothermia set in. Later, a friend helped him retrieve their boat.

*I remember going out in 10- and 12-foot waves, wondering if I would come up out of the troughs and feeling like I was riding a bucking horse as I crested each whitecap.*

At summer's end, the nightmare returned. He was talking to a friend, Rudolf Dyke, on the beach when again he saw two men capsize. Again, there were high waves and wind, and again, it was soon obvious they were drowning. He recalls:

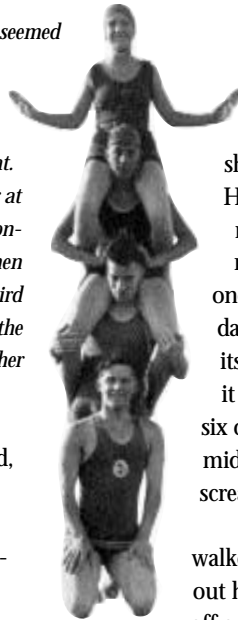
*Rudolf said we had two choices – we could literally watch it happen or pile into my 15-foot fibreglass boat with its 50-horse Mercury engine and go and get them ... I don't remember what sort of boat they had, but they were in the water and definitely in trouble. The wind was screaming down and we dove into these giant waves well*

outside the long pier at Victoria Beach. After what seemed an interminable time, we reached the men and just as we were hauling them into the boat, we hit the Three Sisters. The first wave we knew was a big one and we dragged the guy into the boat. The second one lifted the boat straight up in the air at the prow. It felt as though we were vertical and I honestly thought we would go over backwards ... Then suddenly, as we sat suspended in the air, the third wave hit us, but instead of swamping us, it righted the boat abruptly. I don't know what happened – other than an act of God ... '1

Lake Winnipeg's role as summer playground, tragic as it all too frequently was and is, still presented the lake in its least lethal form. That's because people treated it largely as a bucolic backdrop for fun and leisure activities associated with but not necessarily on or in it. The lake was there to be seen and be seen at, a place for sitting on the beach, playing in the sand, paddling at the water's edge or swimming just off shore. Its proximity to Manitoba's metropolis made it an obvious magnet for people anxious to escape the heat and humidity of the city in the summer.

The lake's playground era predated cottages and beaches. Winnipeg's *Town Topics*, the society newspaper that boasted of being "read by 15,000 of the best people", enthused about steamboat excursions on the lake.

Under a picture of a ship entitled "Summer Cruise", the June 25, 1898 edition extolled the lake's "incomparable" scenic grandeur and "luxurious and comfortable" steamships, equal to any on Lake Superior. A "perfect holiday jaunt", the paper continued, and available right at the city's doorstep.



One of the highlights of those Lake Winnipeg summer excursions was shooting Grand Rapids. The *Winnipeg Free Press* carried an account of this popular summer adventure shortly after the giant, 480-megawatt Manitoba Hydro dam forever extinguished the magnificent torrent in the early 1960s. The rapids had several channels navigable by canoe. Older funseekers opted for one of the less turbulent ones, but the young and the daring would take the middle channel, white water for its entire length. It was a thrilling trip and a wet one; it was not unusual for a canoe to end the passage with six or seven inches of water aboard. "We go down the middle channel because we like to hear the women screaming," the canoemen would say.

One young lady, a passenger on the SS *Wolverine*, walked back on board drenched to her skin and without her shoes. In her excitement, she had pulled them off and tossed them overboard – why, not even she could remember. Visitors to the rapids would be told they served as a weather forecaster. A muted sound indicated fair winds and skies. But if the roar was deeper and more penetrating, one was to prepare for rain and storms.

The MS *Lord Selkirk II*, the lake's last cruise ship, was the largest ever built between the Great Lakes and the Rockies, with accommodation for 130 passengers and 40 crew. Launched in 1969, she was 54 metres long and 13 metres wide and weighed

*In just 15 years, between 1912 when the Winnitoba, below, took well-heeled passengers cruising on the lake, and 1927, when Peter McAdam caught this athletic quartet performing at Winnipeg Beach, both mores and attire changed dramatically. Summer casual had arrived.*

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