



The kids building a gigantic sand castle on the beach at L' Da Ru Resort. I'm in the black t-shirt directly behind the castle (courtesy of Peggy Meador).

Summer of the Spider

by NICK MEADOR

Some places remain, even if time passes and the people leave and the buildings get demolished, because we protect the place inside of us.

Each summer my family spent a week on Spider Lake at L' Da Ru Resort, a retreat on the northern shore with about twenty log cabins spread along a shaded hill. Starting in 1985, we'd go over Fourth of July week, usually during the Cherry Festival. After our Saturday afternoon arrival, we were looking at seven days of play and relaxation. As the day went on, we'd watch other families – some of whom we knew from previous years – fill into the other cabins. My family of four (boosted to five in 1988 when my second brother was born) stayed in a small cabin on the western hill. What I remember most vividly about our time in the cabin was not the architecture or interior design, or even whether or not they had TVs, but the fact that we got food our mom wouldn't usually buy for us at home – namely sugary cereals like Frosted Flakes and Cocoa Puffs, and candy like Twizzlers.

Once we were settled in, there was only one thing to do: go to the beach. Every morning, an employee used an ATV to rake the long stretch of Michigan sand, and then set out the lounge chairs – the kind with soft plastic straps running perpendicular to the length of your body – for patrons to use. The beach



faced south on a relatively straight piece of shoreline, creating long, hot days to sprawl out in the sun.

My family had one yellow inflatable TUFF-TUBE, so my brothers and I had to take turns with, and sometimes argue over, who got to float on it. The water was murky, and we never opened our eyes under the surface without goggles. It seemed like the water would burn if it wasn't clear like pool water, which – since chlorinated water does burn – was probably false. When the tube got too flaccid to float on, we'd carry it up the hill to the free air pump attached to a cabin.

In between rushes into the water, kids would gather on the beach to construct massive sand castles. The easiest way was to fill a bucket with sand and pack it tightly, then turn it over and gently pat the plastic until the block of sand stood on its own. Repetitions of this were accented by dripping wet sand on top, digging a mote for water, and inserting little twig flagpoles on top. If we weren't in the mood for constructive efforts, we would smash our creation and bury each other in the sand. Then it looked as if a head was sitting there on the beach talking to passersby.

It went on like this throughout the week, any time the sky was blue and the sun shone down on the millions of grains of sand. All day we could hear ski boats jetting by on the lake towing water skiers, while a warm breeze blew through the trees that covered the hill behind the beach. Visitors occupied most of the beach chairs, but there was never a shortage if you needed one. Some people sat in the same spot every single day. I remember one man in his late '30s would sit at the west end of the beach, smothered in tanning oil, for what seemed like eight hours per day. My father joked that the man would be the first to get skin cancer. As for my dad, he spent his share of time "warming the bones," as he would call it.

As the late afternoon haze faded into evening, people filed off the beach and into their cabins to clean up and cook dinner. Plus, we had to prepare for the featured event: the bonfire. The large fire pit was a circle set about eight inches deep in the concrete, surrounded by simple red wooden benches, right at the edge of the beach. Anyone was free to light the fire, and someone would usually do so by 8:00 pm. Then a variable group of 15 to 20 people would gather, get to know each other, and roast marshmallows under the starlight.



Inevitably, some kid would decide to find a wooden stick to use instead of the provided metal ones, and other children would copy the act because it seemed *cooler*. My parents quickly thwarted this plan, or any attempt to put an object other than a wooden log into the fire, informing us that it was dangerous. Nevertheless, somehow these campfires remain one of the most special aspects of my time there; the flames flashed the warmest and brightest; the smoke smelled of the richest pine; the s'mores were the most gooey and sweet. All subsequent campfires are compared to and remind me of the ones at L' Da Ru.

One evening each week, before the campfire, a group of about 20 teenagers and adults would swim the relatively short length from the L' Da Ru beach to the nearby island – one of three in Spider Lake. They had to wait until after 7:30 pm, when the high-speed boating ceased until 11:00 am the next day. I became determined to make the swim one time, though I was probably only eight years old, because I had a tendency to follow people who were much older than me. This tendency was boosted because a teenager named Michelle came during our week. She occasionally babysat my brothers and I back in Troy, and I probably had a crush on her.

My mom said she would allow my participation as long as I wore a life jacket. She wasn't worried about my swimming ability, since all three children in our family had been well trained; she was simply an overprotective mother. I yielded to her request, because I was seeking the thrill of being included in the group of adults, more than the accomplishment of crossing the passage.

That's how sunny days and starry nights went, but Michigan weather is anything but predictable. If the sky was overcast with clouds, we still had plenty of activities to keep busy with. Our first option was usually the shuffleboard at the top of the circle of cabins. We unloaded the discs and rods from the storage cabinet on the side of a cabin, and we usually had to sweep acorns off the concrete board before starting to play. We never knew the proper rules to the game, but we loved the sound of the ceramic discs sliding down the board, especially when they would collide and send a loud *crack* into the air. After shuffleboard, we drifted across the street to the tennis court. We'd take our Mickey Mouse tennis rackets and try to keep the ball going back and forth as many times as possible, which, since we were all under 10 years old, never lasted long.





Me standing in the shady lawn between the cabins and Spider Lake (courtesy of Peggy Meador).

When we'd had enough of those activities, or if it started to rain, we'd dash to the small arcade situated underneath one of the upper cabins. The arcade probably saw more traffic as the years went on, and the Nintendo generation further proliferated. The room did have some classics – like Ms. Pac Man and Gauntlet – and even a respectable pinball machine, but our time in the arcade wasn't all spent on video games; there was also a ping-pong table. On real crummy days when you couldn't swim or do anything outside without getting soaked, ping-pong matches were the main draw. We did know the rules to this game, and we relished the fraying pressboard table and the bumpy rubber paddles. However, our reverence for the game didn't stop us from snapping the little white ball at our opponent's head on occasion, just to see them duck with an angry look on their face.

There was no change machine in the arcade, so we'd have to exchange bills for quarters in the L' Da Ru office, a small room on the side of the owners' house. They were nice people and I never minded going in there. They also had a stock of board games that you could borrow, so we'd turn to Monopoly and Trouble when our parents grew tired of giving us arcade money. If that wore out, I'd find out what Michelle was doing. I remember going to her cabin one afternoon, sitting in their living room for a short while, and then running home when it started to rain harder. I must have been barefooted, because I badly stubbed my toe when I got about halfway there. I rushed into the cabin screaming



and crying with blood starting to run out the tip of my big toe. I think stubbed toes were one of the worst experiences of childhood. Of course, that was all forgotten with a bandage and a mother's affection. But strangely this incident sticks out in my mind as a precursor to all romantic pursuits; they usually end with a stubbed emotional "toe."

When the rain passed, we'd head into Traverse City, a place that fascinated me with little more than a drive through. The East Bay looked like a Caribbean cove as we descended the hills on Hammond Road and Four Mile Road. The endless stretch of motels on US-31 all seemed homey and welcoming, even if their signs flashed "no vacancy." My eyes fixated on each of the putt-putt golf courses as we passed them. Even going to the soft serve ice cream stand at Garfield Road was an adventure in itself. I usually got a vanilla cone with butterscotch topping. After ordering we'd drive over to Bryant Park to cherish our creamy treats. We had to finish our cones before mounting the spinning merry-go-round, one of those wonders that disappeared from playgrounds by the end of the '90s.

On the West Bay side, our next destination was Clinch Park Zoo. We'd traverse the tunnel and search for all the native Michigan animals; my favorites were turtles, otters, and bison. We wouldn't let our parents leave without riding the miniature train, which was painted in bright colors, and which puffed out a substantial "choo choo" for its small size.

We would only go on a few rides at the Cherry Festival, since the same carnival stopped in our hometown in September. I adamantly sought out the soft serve yogurt with cherry topping, a sort of rudimentary cherries jubilee – that is, if it had been a few days since our visit to the ice cream stand. My father was determined to see the Blue Angels air show, even though the intense noise gave us children quite a jolt. It was obvious that he was nurturing his inner child, since he had admired Navy fighter jets and aquatic SEALs his whole life.

We always made sure to go to Dill's Saloon for a dinner and show, which featured college-aged musicians throughout the summer. The host was a plump, animated woman who eventually remembered our family because we came every year. I recall very vividly one show where they played the Doobie Brother's "Long Train Runnin'." I loved the way the jazz chords rang and cut into each other. That single performance would influence my guitar style when I took lessons in high school some ten years later. On another occasion the show's



theme had something to do with Disney. My little brother got invited on stage during the “Prince Ali” song from Aladdin, and all the cast members surrounded him. He was pretty angry that my parents had volunteered him for the job.

During nights up north surrounding Fourth of July, there seemed to be hundreds of fireworks shows. They were all near a lake, and the crowds were usually massive. I don’t remember the specific towns we went to besides Traverse City, or even what the actual fireworks were like. I do remember endless lines of parked cars, people in rows of fold-up chairs on the sidewalk, and children adorned with glow necklaces and bracelets.

We came during that week from as early as I can remember until I was about nine. Then there was a block of time when we didn’t go to Traverse City. I don’t recall the reason; maybe my parents never told us why. But by the summer of 1994 – when I was 11 – we returned to L’ Da Ru during the first week in August. I think the cabins were full during our regular week, but we liked the new stretch better than the old one.

My family switched to one of the larger cabins in the center of the hill, probably because of the havoc wreaked by the three hungry, moody, hyperactive boys, the youngest of whom was a six-year-old. L’ Da Ru itself hadn’t really changed, but now there were more kids around, and the weather might have even been more dependable for summer fun. What did change was my perception of the resort and Traverse City as a whole. I became more aware of the geographic location, and more interested in navigating when we’d drive up north. Putt-putt golf was now called Pirate’s Cove. A pizza dinner was now ordered by the name of Peegeo’s Pizza, and had the reputation of being the best in the whole TC area.

Another change was that my family had purchased a small skiing boat. This was our passage onto a lake that we had previously been cut off from. We traveled past the second island and into the southern portion of the lake, into areas we had scarcely seen before. The name Spider Lake started to make more sense. Surveyors did not find an alarming number of arachnids in the area; the name refers to the branches and curves of the relatively small body of water.





The Meador family at L' Da Ru in July 1990 (courtesy of Peggy Meador).

We also got to go tubing and waterskiing during the day and fishing in the evening. We hardly ever caught anything, since the lake's fish population wasn't abundant. But I once caught a 12-inch fish while trolling into the dock. After I stopped trying or caring, I achieved my goal. I proudly held the fish up on the dock as if my skill had somehow caused the fish to bite my lure.

With more kids my age around, we had even fewer moments of boredom. We still spent most of our time at the beach, but we also had a few street hockey games on the fenced-in tennis court throughout the week. A few families came from Grosse Pointe, and their hockey player sons organized the events. My brother and I had just started playing ice hockey as well, after many summers of endless street hockey matches, so we felt comfortable competing.

Another family from Bloomfield Hills became pretty close friends with mine, and there was a boy in the family a year older than me. They also had a younger boy who, according to my mom, had a learning disability. He didn't seem very disabled to me. He did repeat phrases over and over, and he sat by himself on the beach. But what I remember the most about him was his incredible skill with Ms. Pac Man. It was intimidating to watch him gather those yellow dots and turn the ghosts into mincemeat.

The groups from both Grosse Pointe and Bloomfield Hills had ski boats as well, and they would take two or three tubes out at once, which seemed amazing at the time. In one of the GP families, there was a girl about my age. We never really talked, and she didn't seem all that nice either, but I remember having a thing for her. It was probably about the time when girls started to seem



really threatening. One night she came out of her cabin after a shower, and her well-brushed hair looked striking in the lakeside twilight as the campfire crowd started to gather. I don't remember her name, and she probably never learned mine.

Being a little older, I also got some freedom from my parents. My brothers and I would play flashlight tag with the other kids once the darkness filled in. There was very little order to this game. We'd basically run around the yard next to the campfire, jumping out from behind the enormous trees to flash our opponents in the eyes. Soon we'd start being too loud for the hour, and the parents would take our flashlights away.

Getting older also meant seeing L' Da Ru in a different light. It was during this stretch that I remember walking down the beach sidewalk in the morning, when the pink light of dawn hung over the still-as-glass water and the boats hadn't yet started buzzing. Sometimes during the day, at the request of my mother, I would rest on the swinging chair in the shade just behind that sidewalk. Occasionally, my brothers and I would even lie on a blanket under the trees, close our eyes, and listen to the branches fluttering in the breeze.

My last trip to L' Da Ru was a short one during an autumn weekend in 1997, at the beginning of my high school years. Every autumn in Michigan creates a bittersweet sensation. The death and renewal of nature usually translates into growth and positive changes in my life. That weekend most of the cabins were empty, even though "color tours" are usually popular up north. All the leaves were changing, the air was crisp and cool, and the sky was more often cloudy than not. We still had a campfire one night, but with only one or two families to join us, it didn't feel the same.

Sometime around the turn of the millennium, L' Da Ru was sold, the cabins were torn down, and the Spider Lake Retreat was built. The new single building was intended to be a corporate gathering place and luxury lodge. I remember feeling a bit betrayed for not being consulted before this sale, as if anyone who ever spent time there automatically owned a share in the property. I was glad that they kept most of the tall trees intact, since construction projects usually clear a landscape and leave a barren wasteland.

Passing the property in a boat today, it looks like an entirely different place. In fact, there's hardly any indication that the L' Da Ru cabins ever stood



there. As a child, the place seemed completely separate from the rest of the world. There was a radiance wholly unique to the resort. The new building looks coldly modern, covered in white paint and large stones instead of natural wood tones. The beach is almost always empty, with no happy cries of children playing in the water. There's no laughter around the campfire, and no ping-pong tournament cheers emanating from within the arcade.

Traverse City has changed as well, luckily not too much for the worse. Of course life has also changed me in the decade since my last visit to L' Da Ru. But I carry that place with me wherever I go, whenever I visit other states and tell people how wonderful Michigan can be. I accept that visiting Spider Lake won't feel quite as special as it used to, but I hope that one day I can create those kind of memories for my own family. I will never forget that shaded hill of cabins on the northern edge of the lake where I was lucky enough to spend my early summers in youthful bliss.

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