

Taking measure of life at a Pocono retreat

By William C. Kashatus

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately,” wrote Henry David Thoreau in 1845 from his small hut at Walden Pond, near Concord, Mass. “To front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I have not lived.” Disillusioned by a government which he believed condoned war and human slavery, Thoreau sought refuge from the “follies of society.” *Walden*, the literary expression of his two-year sojourn, is widely considered to be a classic work on the virtues of individualism and self-reliance. For me, however, it is a reminder of the essential facts of life — the simple pleasures that make life meaningful — as well as the struggle to protect them from the more mundane demands of the daily routine.

My “Walden Pond” is a small lake nestled in the Pocono Mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania. Known simply as Silkworth, the lake is fed by cold springs and drained from the southwest by a creek that rambles along a back mountain road. The surrounding woods are oak, pine, some birch and mostly thick brush, except for the trails that have been blazed over the years by local hunters. Fishing huts, many of which date to the Depression era, still dot the shoreline, a reminder of the poor man’s paradise the lake represented for a generation of coal miners who vacationed there. It is a scene that humbles as well as inspires.

My father purchased a small lake-front lot at Silkworth in the 1960s, probably to slow the clock a bit from the demands of the workaday world and to fulfill a childhood ambition to own one of these fishing huts. Every weekend since I can remember, he would pack up our family and head to the lake. It was a great escape. Nothing ever really changes at Silkworth, except, of course, the seasons.

Autumn weekends found us on the lake rowing our wood-frame boat along the shoreline to revel in the changing colors of the season. Winter brought endless sleigh rides and evening ice skates while the spring was dominated by fly fish-

floating around the lake in giant inner tubes, only to be lulled to sleep at night by the rhythmic sound of bullfrogs.

Sometime during my preadolescence, my mother and sister chose to remain in Philadelphia during the weekend and Silkworth became a “getaway” that only my father and I shared. What’s more, I was permitted to do things that my mother would never tolerate: diving off the end of our rowboat in the middle of the lake and swimming to shore, riding trail bikes through the surrounding woods, and — once in a great while — getting a sip of the locals’ homemade brew. Eliminate Sunday morning church services and those weekends would have been perfect!

I guess it was sometime during those golden moments that I grew to love my father.

These days, I find myself driving up the Northeast Extension quite often with my own son.

Since he’s only 3 years old, our activities are necessarily limited to skipping rocks across the lake, sharing the autumn sunsets, and plodding along the nearby pine trails singing his favorite song, “The Happy Wanderer.” My wife indulges us. Although I’ve made a half-hearted invitation for her to join us

on more than a few occasions, she understands that this is a “man thing” and chooses to remain in the city. Besides, it’s no great loss for her — bullfrogs keep her awake at night.

For me, on the other hand, Silkworth has become an “essential fact of life.” It’s not that I’m trying to escape the demands of teaching in an urban private school as much as I’m trying to care for my soul. To enjoy the good and beautiful things in life with my son, just as my father shared them with me. And to enjoy those things right away because, deep down, I know they won’t last. They won’t wait for me to finish the pressing details of my job or to worry about all the things I have to do tomorrow.

Maybe if I’m lucky in the end, I will discover what it means to have lived as a human being was meant to live — and that at least one life will be different for my having passed through it.

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*It's still
possible, like
Thoreau, to
escape
society's
follies.*

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