

**A History of Coffin's Shady Beach**

**By**

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Today, at the southern shore of Cedar Lake, there are million-dollar homes that overlook the water. With the building of these homes, the surroundings have drastically changed. Many of the huge oak trees have been cut down and modern landscaping has been added. The drive ways are gated. No one would even know that Coffin's Shady Beach, one of Cedar Lake's well-known resorts, was once here.

The beginning of the resort originates with Emma and her son Cordie Baker Coffin. Alfred Coffin, was born in Kennebec, Maine in 1853 and came with his parents and the rest of the family to Lake County, Indiana in the 1860s. Emma was born in Lake County in 1861. Later, Alfred and Emma married and in 1891, Cordie was born. Cordie's father was a butcher who worked in Crown Point at what was Crown Meats. " Then, in 1896, Cordie's father died at the age of 42, leaving Emma widowed " ( Shearer 2011: 1 ). " The United States Census, shows that the Coffins lived in Center Township, before the land was purchased where the resort was. " ( United States Census Bureau 1900: 9B ).

Then, in about 1916, Emma and Cordie purchased 15 to 20 acres of land at the south end of Cedar Lake, once belonging to Obadiah Taylor, III. " The Monon Railroad ran along the western shore of the lake and it also had a spur that turned off of it running east, along the southern shore that the ice companies used " ( Oostman 2011: 114 ). This spur ran through the Coffin property and had to be crossed to get to the lake. The property stretched almost to the west side of Cline Avenue and even included part of what is Pine Crest Marina. Another feature that passed close to

The property was Pickerel Creek, named for the pickerel that were caught from here.

Once the United States entered World War I, Cordie was overseas serving his country.

“ Cordie’s occupation before entering the service was farming “ ( United States World War I Draft Registration Cards 1917-1918 ). Then he returned in 1919 and he and his mother started Coffin’s Shady Beach. “ However, according to Cordie’s son Merritt, Cordie deeded the land to his mother and started the resort before he went off to war “ ( Manes 2014: 24 ).

Until the cottages and cabins were built, tents were set up to accommodate guests all over the resort. Decks were built to pitch the tents on.

The cabins were built in the 1920s. Three wooden cottages and two block cottages were built on the property. “ What was called the ‘ big house, ‘ was grandma’s ( Emma’s ) house, located at 147<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Cline, close to the entrance of the resort “ ( Cedar Lake Historical Association Coffin Family Interview 2019 ). “ According to the United States Census of 1930, Cordie’s occupation is listed as carpenter and the industry given is house, and he was the one who built the cottages and cabins “ ( United States Census Bureau 1930: 6B ). Some of the additional cottages that were built measured only eight by 10 feet and were moved by rolling them into place by the use of telephone poles.

Because of hard times during the Great Depression, Cordie went into the real estate business to earn extra money. He also job shared with local Charlie Watt. The family also raised chickens in the basement to serve as a source of food. “ In fact, Merritt said that he was born in an old chicken coop and his dad built living quarters above it “ ( Manes 2014:24 ).

“ Throughout its years, the resort was advertised as Coffin’s Shady Beach and simply Shady Beach, as revealed by local newspapers “ ( Coffin’s Shady Beach 1928: 2 and Shady Beach 1933: 8 ). Parking at the resort cost 25 cents. Tents were rented for eight-dollars a week and cottages for 12 dollars a week. The resort had a safe, shady beach, an electric lighted pier, snack shop and lake lots. Fishing, boating and picnicking were popular activities here. “ Swings, slides and teeter boards were also included “ ( Shady Beach 1933: 8 ). Although Coffin’s was smaller than some of the better-known resorts like Lassen’s and Surprise Park, it was still as successful as they were. “ Cordie reported that 86 cars were parked at the resort during the Fourth of July, 1933 “ ( Shady Beach 1933: 8 ). They even had guests from Chicago, including Camp Fire Girls. Some Chicagoans even rented cottages here for the entire summer.

At that time, the Souhrada family lived in the area around Coffin’s. “ According to Frank Souhrada, Jr., the neighborhood kids including the Henns and Obornes had free access to the lake for swimming and played baseball games on Coffin property “ ( Souhrada 2019 ).

In its later years, the resort’s hours were from dawn to dusk. Services were available to campers 24 hours a day. The snack shop was open on weekdays, from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM and on weekends, from 9:00 AM to 9:00 PM. Once the trailer park was established, campers were here from about April 15 to October 15.

By 1933, at the age of 70 years, Cordie’s mother Emma died and he and his family continued to operate the resort.

In 1948, the Monon Railroad created their Cedar Lake Cut-Off, in which the tracks were re-located one half of a mile west from the lake, to completely avoid passing through the huge

Paisley Marsh. When this was done, the spur that passed through the Coffin's property was probably removed.

Then, about 1960, Cordie's son Merritt took over the resort. " Larry said that Merritt built the large steel water slide at this time. " He went around Indiana and some other states for designs, learned to weld and then built it " ( Cedar Lake Historical Association Coffin Family Interview 2019 ). During each summer, wooden, two-person sleds with wheels went down the slide. The wheels of the sleds fit into the slots of the slide. During the summers, the waterslide was used by the hour for 75 cents and three-dollars for an entire day. Because the sleds were heavy to pull up the water slide, there was a lifeguard available.

Coffin's Shady Beach also offered winter recreation and a six-foot toboggan was used on the slide. The toboggan had steel runners and water was poured onto them and the slide to make the toboggan go faster. " According to Larry Coffin, if someone could steer well enough they could reach as far as Rockwell Shores " ( Cedar Lake Historical Association Coffin Family Interview 2019 ). Ice skating was another part of the winter recreation here. Cross-country skiing was also included. Slot car races were popular in the game room and the pool tables were removed to make room for them. Even hot chocolate was available during the winter.

Over the years, the beach was expanded by bringing in truckloads of sand periodically. However, because of erosion, much of the sand washed away into Cedar Lake. Included with the beach was a bath house and wool swimsuits were rented that occasionally had to be disinfected.

During the time that Merritt operated the resort, it was commonplace for others to borrow his tools and not return them. Because of this, he painted his tools half black and half white and marked them with an " M ".

Coffin's Shady Beach Resort was a safe haven for the neighborhood children. For one, it was convenient because the resort was within walking distance for them. " The resort had a public address system, which was used to make announcements and page the kids when their parents called to have them come home " ( Cedar Lake Historical Association Coffin Family Interview 2019 ).

Also included in the resort was a snack shop, where a variety of penny, nickel and dime candy like Tootsie Rolls, black and red licorice and Slow-Poke suckers were available. A lot of the candy came from the family paint and candy store in Gary. Pop was also available here. Other concessions included cotton candy, hot dogs, burgers, pizza, floats and milkshakes. " Mylene says that the ice cream was purchased at King Cole in Hammond and was wrapped in heavy army blankets to insulate it so it did not melt on its way to the resort " ( Cedar Lake Historical Association Coffin Family Interview 2019 ). Dian remembers her years at the resort making snow cones.

The game room, as mentioned, was where a variety of indoor games were available. Pool tables, pinball machines and other arcade games and a jukebox were included.

In the 1950s and 1960s, boating and water skiing were popular sports at Cedar Lake. " From about 1953 to 1958, the Capri Boat and Ski Club was headquartered at Coffin's Shady Beach and was managed by Jack Malone and his wife " ( Conversation with Ron Gracz: 2018 ). Many from Illinois, especially from around Lansing, Harvey and Tinley Park came here for water skiing. One water skiing enthusiast was Ron Gracz. He did a lot of tricks, including skiing while standing on a ladder. He has also said that another trick was when three men would ski in a pyramid shape. There was a ramp where jumps were made and the various boat and ski clubs put

on annual performances. Those coming from Illinois met others at Cedar Lake and formed long-term relationships. This is how Ron Gracz and Pat Collins met and later became a married couple. “ The Aqua-Nuts was another boat and ski club that was based at Coffin’s” ( Aqua-Nuts, ca 1960 ) . In fact, many of the Coffin family also partook in boating and skiing when they were not working at the resort. “ Many times they were out on the lake as early as 6:00 AM, because they had to start work by 9:00 AM “ ( Cedar Lake Historical Association Coffin Family Interview 2019 ).

Other people met at the resort, which would end in long-lasting relationships. In fact, Cordie met his wife Sarah when Sarah came out to Cedar Lake with a Boy Scout troupe. Chuck Kouder and Pam Coffin met as a result of Chuck’s family coming to the resort. “ In contrast, Merritt met his wife Betty at the old Lowell High School and they ran off to get married when he was 17 and she was 15 “ ( Manes 2014: 24 ).

By about 1950, a trailer park was established and it began with about five trailers. Eventually, it expanded to other parts of the resort, especially close to Pickerel Creek. A brochure from the 1960s reveals that space for about 40 trailers was available here at that time. The rent was about \$100 a month with water, sewer and electricity. Laundry facilities were also included in the amenities. With the trailer rentals, Coffin’s Shady Beach was able to earn more revenue.

By about the age of nine, Larry Coffin began working here each summer. He and his brother Terry worked as life guards and Pam worked in the snack shop. “ As many as four or five girls worked in the snack shop on busy weekends “ ( Cedar Lake Historical Association Coffin Family Interview 2019 ). “ Pam Coffin Kouder says that in order to work in the snack shop, you

had to be able to count the change back when giving it to the customer “ ( Cedar Lake Historical Association Coffin Family Interview 2019 ).

Yet, it was not just the family who worked here. “Many friends of the family also worked here, earning money each summer “ ( Cedar Lake Historical Association Coffin Interview 2019) . Pam hired Roberta Torrence to help at the snack shop. “ Merritt paid Jerry Anderson 25 cents an hour to go out and hire those who would work for a nickel an hour “ ( Cedar Lake Historical Association Coffin Family Interview 2019 ). Other tasks performed were mowing, cleaning restrooms, launching boats, stacking trailers and especially making sure that the customers were happy. According to the Coffin family, when it came to paying the kids for their work, they received quarters and dimes painted with red finger nail polish, to track where they used their money at the resort. “ Merritt told the kids that they could use the quarters to play pool or the pinball machines, but could not buy pop or candy with them, because he made more money from the games than the other concessions “ ( Manes 2014: 24 ). If someone asked for a day off, it had to be a weekday, because the weekends were very busy.

Another important element in the operation of the resort was the learning of a strong work ethic. Merritt wanted every job at the resort done right. He would give someone a list of tasks and if he found that if one of the tasks was not done right, he had them complete the entire list of jobs again. Also, the older generation of the Coffin family showed the younger one how to run the resort, so that they were prepared to run it once their parents were gone.

A huge change came when it went from a public to private resort in the late 1960s and early 1970s. “ One of the main reasons was because many of the friends who worked here went off to



school or the service “ ( Cedar Lake Historical Association Coffin Family Interview 2019 ). With a private resort, the Coffins did not need a large work crew. Also, more trailers, games and vending machines were added to increase the resort revenue. “ Merritt built a concrete block building and a Flexicore roof was put on it, where they had dances and parties “ ( Manes 2014: 24 ).

One of Coffin’s resort rivals was Pine Crest Marina. “ Mylene said that you had to be careful, because boats would shoot out from Pine Crest, creating a great caution “ ( Cedar Lake Historical Association Coffin Family Interview 2019 ). Despite this the Gross’ were peaceful with the Coffin’s. “ Merritt said that another rival was Midway Ballroom where Jim Kubal served mainly adults and Coffin’s served the kids “ ( Manes 2014: 24 ).

Throughout the history of Coffin’s Shady Resort, most of the land stayed in possession of the family. In 1950, Marvin received one acre of land to build a house on. “ At a later time, a chunk of land was given to the Girl Scouts and then later, it was sold and became part of La Tulip Harbor “ ( Cedar Lake Historical Association Coffin Family Interview 2019 ). Other family members received parts of the property to build houses. In the earlier days, Cordie gave parks or lake lots to people, but they had to pay the taxes on them. Yet, some failed to do this and those pieces of property were sold in tax sales. “ This is how Bud Adams acquired some of his property at the south end of the lake “ ( Cedar Lake Historical Association Coffin Family Interview 2019 ).

Later, about 1984, Merritt’s son Larry and his wife Sue managed the resort for about six years.

They were followed by Larry's brother Terry, who took over and bought the resort about 1990. " Through the years, the resort was sold parcel by parcel, until about 2005, when Terry sold the last five acres " ( Oostman 2011: 115 ). At about 2006, the development of South Beach began and the building of the million-dollar homes started. Terry also owned a resort in Monticello, Indiana known as Bay Side Resort.

Those of the Coffin family have reminisced many times about the resort. The imagination, ingenuity and frugality in the creation of the resort by the family was what made it unique. They have remarked how the resort drew many summer visitors here, but also brought many who would stay here year-round like the Torrence and Kors families. " When the resort was sold, many in the area commented how Coffin's was the place to come to at Cedar Lake " ( Cedar Lake Historical Association Coffin Family Interview 2019 ). The Coffin family members admit that life at Coffin's Shady Beach was a lot of hard work, but was also great fun for them. Many people still talk about their memories of Coffin's and what a good influence it had on Cedar Lake.

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