

Where the Teaberries Grow

Life at Keswick in
the '50s, '60s, and '70's.

Cherri Raws Freeman

Where the Teaberries Grow

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Dedication

For Jan, Judee, and Karen—my sisters, who grew up beside me in a world both beautiful and hard, who know what it means to belong to Keswick, and who carry the same joys, losses, and echoes of home.

This is our story.



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Introduction

As I walked around the lake this afternoon, soaking in the crisp fall air and the quiet shimmer of the water, it occurred to me how many little pieces of history—mine and my sisters’—live only with us. They’re tiny things, almost hidden, the sort of details that vanish when the last person who remembers them is gone. Dad wrote the book on Keswick’s history, stretching all the way back to our great-grandfather. His work is a treasure. But who remembers where the teaberries grew? Who knew what “Little Egypt” meant? Who can still smell the cigar and pipe smoke clinging to the Colony men’s jackets as they sat shoulder to shoulder in the Chapel?

At the entrance to Keswick, a sign still reads, Welcome Home. That feels right. Keswick will always be home—our center of gravity—no matter how many roads we’ve lived along since. I own a house, but Keswick is home.

Our family was made up of my parents, my sisters Jan, Judee, and Karen, and the baby brother we never got to meet. Christopher was promoted to Heaven just before he was born, but he has always been part of us. Yet our family grew much larger than the six of us. The staff were woven into our days like threads in a tapestry, ordinary and intimate. We saw most of them every day, especially at dinner

in the Big House, which was our norm whether guests were on the property or not. We saw our grandparents, Addison and Emma, daily too. Later, Aunt Ruth came home from the mission field and joined the mix to care for Grandma as Parkinson's tightened its grip.

Eating dinner in our own house was a novelty—usually reserved for Dad's day off on Wednesdays.

Family life didn't stop at the edge of our front door. The "castle walls" never closed. We were all family. Even the men of the Colony were part of our everyday world. I never remember feeling afraid because there were alcoholics and addicts living and learning to heal just across the way.

We roamed the grounds with the kind of freedom today's children rarely taste—no fear, no alarms, no reason to lock our doors except at night when we crawled into bed.

We had lakes to wander, boats to row, tennis courts to play on, horses to feed, bikes to ride—everything a child could dream of. And still, we were poor. Not poor in love or adventure, but poor in the ways our classmates measured life. We didn't own the latest clothes or shiny new toys. Most of our dresses were stitched by Mom's hands or passed down from someone else's closet. We were an anomaly: children with access to a resort-like playground, yet as poor as the proverbial church mouse. Perhaps that's why the little things matter so much. They were ours.

CHAPTER 1:

The Lakes That Raised Us

A Walk Around the Lower Lake—The Quiet Heart

Some memories do not sit in tidy boxes or unfold neatly in order. They live in places. For me, childhood is stitched into the landscape around the Lower Lake at America's Keswick. The dirt paths, cedar stands, bridges, and quiet nooks along the shore hold far more than scenery—they carry family stories, friendships, the rhythms of ministry life, and the wonder of growing up in a world shaped by both people and God.

To walk around the lake is to revisit the map of much of my childhood. So come with me, step by step, as I return to the places that formed the backdrop to our days. It is only a walk around the water, but in it lies much of the world of who we were.

I used to wonder what it would be like to grow up in an ordinary neighborhood. Ours was anything but ordinary. Instead of sidewalks and neatly fenced yards, we had six hundred acres of New Jersey

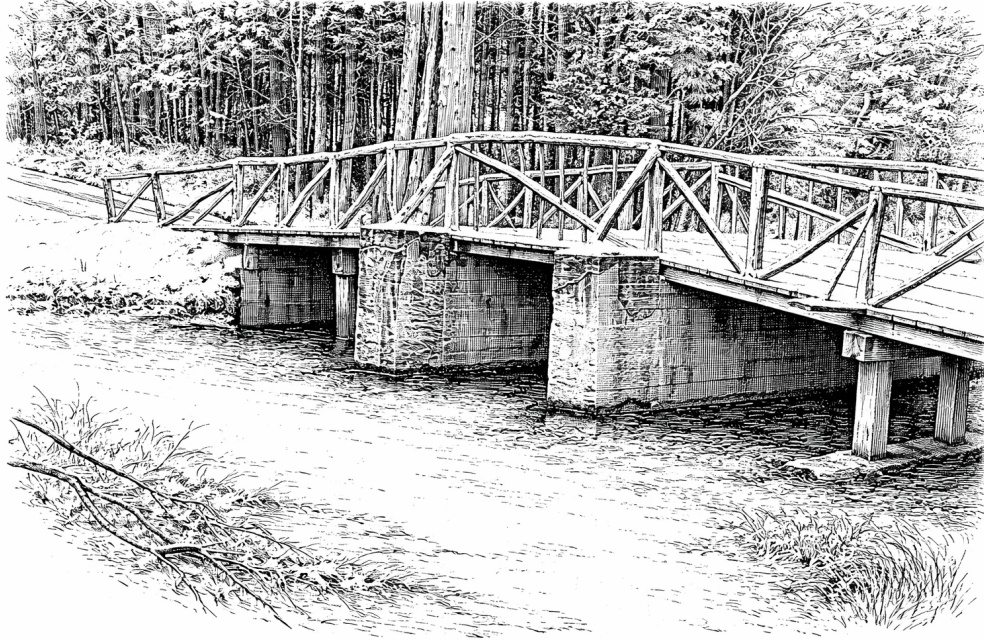
pinelands, three lakes stitched together by streams and footpaths, and the cluster of buildings that made up Keswick. Staff homes were scattered like quiet outposts among the trees.

The Colony, the Chapel, and the conference buildings were simply part of the landscape—unremarkable to us only because they were all we had ever known.

To introduce you to my neighborhood, let's take a slow walk around the Lower Lake. Step onto the sandy dirt road beside me and breathe in the clean, resin-rich scent of pines and cedars—a smell so rooted in this place that I can still conjure it when I close my eyes. We'll begin at the wooden bridge that leads from the Big House—Raws Memorial, if you want its proper name—down toward the Monument.

That bridge was a small world unto itself. It was where we played Pooh Sticks, leaning over the railing to watch the tiny twigs we dropped race each other beneath the planks. Canoeing under the bridge felt like slipping into a secret passageway, especially as the water carried us toward the spillway flowing from the Upper Lake. Along the banks, wild roses reached out as if trying to touch the bridge's wooden supports, their delicate pink blossoms softening the rough boards.

Every so often the bridge needed repairs—especially after the unforgettable day a delivery truck attempted to cross and crashed through. For months we stepped around construction cones and planks, watching the progress as if the bridge were a patient recovering from surgery. Even with its imperfections, it remained one of the prettiest spots on the lake.



We took countless photographs there—smiling friends, family gatherings, or simply the lake itself, calm and reflective. In autumn, vibrant leaves arched over the water, their colors mirrored perfectly in the still surface. On the Big House side, tall cedars lined the bank, standing guard over a tiny sandy patch where the mallard ducks gathered as if they owned the place.

Just beyond the bridge, a narrow trail curled along the water's edge toward the Upper Lake. It was a wet, mucky path that clung to your shoes and left its mark long after you returned home. A little farther on, behind the Monument, another trail—the Monument Trail—cut through mossy ground. Sphagnum moss lined its edges like deep green velvet, soaking up the passing footsteps of anyone who ventured there.

The Monument itself rose quietly from the clearing, built by the men of the Colony to honor Keswick's founder—my great-grandfather, William Raws. They erected it after he died suddenly at

just fifty-two, his heart failing long before his work felt finished. As a child, I never thought to ask my grandfather about him. Children rarely understand how precious stories are until the storytellers are gone. Grandpa died of a heart attack at the end of my freshman year of high school, and even now I catch myself wishing I could ask him just one more question.

Across from the Monument, a stand of cedars and other trees created a tapestry of shadows at night, stretched long by the glow of a single streetlight across the road. A tiny stream trickled through the grove, slipping under the road to feed another patch of wetlands.

When I was growing up, a simple bench and a small wooden pipe rack were fixed to a tree nearby. A handmade sign read Little Egypt. This was the designated spot where Colony men could smoke their pipes or cigars—never cigarettes, which carried too much of the old life they were trying to leave behind. I never learned who named it or why, though I imagine someone drew a parallel between the Israelites' bondage in Egypt and the bondage these men were seeking freedom from.

The pipe rack hung on the tree so they could leave their pipes there between the allowed smoking times, a quiet ritual in a quiet place.

The Colony ministry was the quiet center of gravity at Keswick, the place everything else seemed to orbit. The conference ministry brought crowds and music and movement, but the Colony was the steady heartbeat beneath it all—steady, hopeful, sacred in a way I didn't fully understand as a child.

The Colony building itself—a modest stretch of red brick nestled among the pines—felt both near and far to us. We passed it constantly,

yet we were rarely allowed inside. That hint of mystery made it feel like another world. Sometimes Dad would take us along when he gave morning devotions, and for a few minutes we were allowed into that world: the cool, green-painted cement floors, the dining room with its picture of Jesus bending low to rescue the lost sheep, the round tables waiting for the day to begin. Everything felt familiar and foreign at the same time, as if we were visiting a place we belonged to but did not inhabit.

Twice a year, during Reunion Weekend, the Colony opened its doors wide. Graduates and their families filled the dining room for cake after the testimony service, and only then—when we were older—were we allowed to slip in with them. Even now, as an adult, I feel a flutter of awkwardness stepping inside. It was the men's space: men who were fighting for their lives. I was only ever an observer, watching transformation from the edges.

Across the road lay the ball field, a patch of earth that held more stories than its simple shape suggested. The men played softball there whenever the weather allowed, their laughter carrying across the lake. On Reunion Weekend, the old-timers played the current residents, each game a joyful contest of grit and good-natured rivalry. Sometimes church teams came to play and stayed to shake hands and share encouragement.

We children often set up lemonade stands for anyone in the wooden bleachers who might have a spare coin. A few backless benches lined the third-base side, and a solitary bench perched on first-base side. If someone hit a ball just right, it could soar over left field and land on the quiet highway that wound from Whiting toward Toms River. Behind the third-base benches, the ground

dipped into a marshy hollow. Foul balls vanished there, and none of us were eager to chase them into the mud.

Behind the Colony stretched a dock into the Lower Lake—a simple rectangle of weathered boards, but to us it was a small kingdom. It was where the men fished, where in winter the lucky ones laced up borrowed ice skates, where the lake opened itself wide to anyone standing still long enough to notice. From that dock, you could look toward the Chapel or across to the Pagoda Bridge, and in autumn the world glowed—orange, gold, russet—reflected perfectly in the still water.

When I was small, an old building stood just beyond the Colony—a jumble of maintenance shop, storage shed, and mystery. We called it the Lakeside building. Long before my time, it had been the men's dormitory, and it carried those echoes. Mr. Jim Ridings, one of the Colony grad staff men we always addressed with a respectful "Mr.," seemed woven into the place. I don't remember whether he lived there or simply worked among its shelves of dusty tools and oily parts, but the scent of grease and machinery clung to it. It fascinated me in the way forgotten places always do. I seem to remember his fixing watches for people. Eventually the building was torn down, and the larger maintenance garage was built beyond the horse stables.

A little farther down the lake road, just before the small wooden bridge over a trickling stream, was the place where the teaberries grew. A broad, low patch of American wintergreen spread like a secret garden at our feet, its deep green leaves glossy beneath the pines and its bright red berries gleaming like drops of paint.

We loved those berries with a child's wholehearted devotion. We would be running, playing, wandering the property, and then—without a second thought—drop to our knees to pluck the fragrant red beads and pop them into our mouths. We never thought to wash them. They were our wilderness snack, cool and sharp and sweet, the very flavor that once inspired teaberry gum.

In summer, the wild blueberries joined them, staining our fingers as we roamed.

Those tastes still live somewhere inside me, tied to pine needles underfoot, sunlight on the lake, and the feeling of belonging to a place that shaped us before we knew we were being shaped.

A short walk from the teaberry patch, the Chapel rises gently from the landscape, white against the deep green of the cedars. Built in 1958, it was actually the second chapel on the grounds. The first—an old wooden structure that once stood directly across from the present one—succumbed to termites long before my memories began. The “new” Chapel felt permanent and solid, its weathervane crowned with a simple fish that spun in the breeze like a quiet declaration of faith.



There was no air conditioning then, only the steady hum of summer heat pressing against the windows. The wooden pews were hard and unyielding, and we were expected to sit still and behave

ourselves during every service. Because the Colony men were permitted to smoke their pipes and cigars, a gentle tobacco scent always lingered in the air, woven into the wood the way memories weave themselves into a place.

The only activities allowed to keep children occupied were silent ones: counting the wooden panels lining the walls, tracing the holes in the acoustic ceiling tiles, or drawing in our laps.

Judee credits those Chapel services with shaping her gift for sketching portraits—an extraordinary talent she still has. The rest of us, less artistically inclined, found other quiet ways to pass the time.

Ten minutes before every service, the Chapel bell would ring out across the entire property, its notes drifting over the lakes and through the trees. It was the sound that gathered us. Dad and Grandpa preached most often, though staff members and the Colony chaplain sometimes stepped behind the pulpit. On Sunday mornings we arrived in dresses Mom had sewn, our shoes changing with the seasons—black in winter, white in summer.

At the end of each service, the whole congregation recited Deuteronomy 31:8, the Colony verse, spoken in unison like a promise. On Sunday evenings, Grandma babysat us so Mom could attend the service alone. Those evenings with her were a treasure—quiet, gentle, full of the kind of warmth only a grandmother's presence can give. I'll share more about her later.

The Chapel became the backdrop for countless weddings and funerals—moments of joy and sorrow intertwined with the history of the place. My father's funeral was held there in 2008, surrounded by the same walls that had echoed his sermons for decades. One wedding I remember vividly was Georgeann Bader's.

Her parents were long-time friends and eventually staff members at Keswick. She had always wanted a candlelight wedding, but her fiancé was adamantly against it. A power outage struck that day, turning their celebration into a true candlelit wedding—soft, flickering, unforgettable, and so satisfying that she got her heart’s desire after all.

Across the road from the Chapel stood two houses. The larger two-story home was called the Homestead. It was the first dwelling for my great-grandparents and their children, and over the years many staff families lived there. I spent hours inside its rooms when friends from those families invited us over. One of its charms was a “servant’s stairway” tucked away behind the kitchen—a curious feature for such a simple house. The staircase twisted upward in a narrow turn, unlike any staircase we knew, and we loved sneaking up and down it simply because it felt like a secret path.

The smaller house across from it was built soon after the Colony began—more of a tiny cottage than a house, without insulation or heat in the early days. The bathroom initially could only be accessed from outside. When my parents returned to Keswick after Dad finished seminary, they were expected to live with my grandparents in Faith Cottage. With two children already, my mother was not thrilled with that plan. So, while my grandparents were away on vacation, my parents quietly moved into the little cottage instead.

Eventually the cottage was winterized, though Jan remembers still having to use the outside entrance to the bathroom for some time. By the time I arrived, that had been changed. The cottage held two small bedrooms, a living room with a fireplace, a kitchen, and an enclosed back porch that became Jan and Judee’s shared room.

We lived right beside the horse stables and pasture—no wonder horses became a love stitched deep into our childhood. The men of the Colony built a playhouse for us in the back yard, and when we moved to our new home, they dragged it across the frozen lake and up the hill to its new place.

By the time Karen was born, the cottage was bursting at the seams. So, plans began for our new house, built not long after the Chapel was completed—another thread in the woven fabric of this place that shaped us.



Cousin Kenny Whitfield riding Sam

The stables stood like an old friend on the edge of the pasture, their rough wooden boards darkened by time and seasons. Four larger stalls sheltered the horses, and two smaller ones housed the ponies. Between the big stalls lay the tack room, a narrow chamber lined

with saddles, bridles, curry combs, and the countless tools needed to care for the horses. The wood inside had aged into a deep brown, soaked with the scent of leather, hay, and the dusty sweetness of summer afternoons.

Each stall had a split door—solid on the bottom, open on top—so the horses could stretch their heads into the open air. On stormy days, the top half could be latched, turning each stall into a safe little room. Outside, sturdy support poles held up the roof overhang, each fitted with a metal ring where we clipped the halter ropes while saddling and bridling the horses.

To the left of the stables was a fenced ring, dusty and familiar, where we walked overheated horses after long rides, their breaths rising in slow clouds on chilly days. To the right stretched the pasture—quiet, open, and dotted with wildflowers in the spring. An old bathtub, chipped and white, stood as the horses' watering trough. The entire compound was divided by a patchwork of wooden fences and barbed wire, with gates made of long sliding poles that swung open for the horses like invitations.

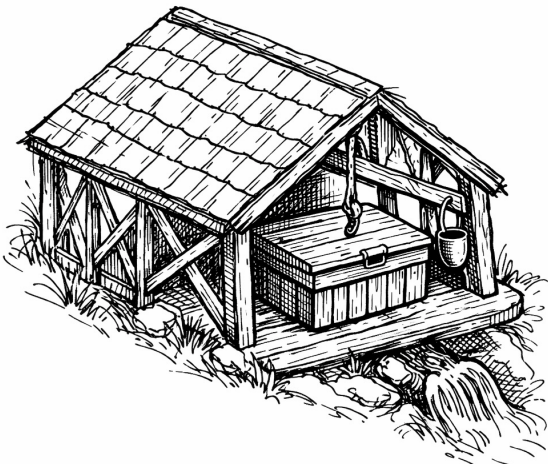
Behind the stables stood a tall pole barn for hay. When I was very young, the fields across the highway were harvested each year, filling the barn with fragrant stacks of baled hay. There had been an old hay barn on that far side of the road too—one of our playgrounds before it was torn down. We leapt from bale to bale in that dim, dusty loft, believing ourselves acrobats and adventurers. It's strange how buildings disappear but the echoes of our laughter inside them live on.

Across the dirt road from the stables sat the maintenance shop—always simply “the shop” to us.

It has remained almost unchanged through all the years I've known it. If a Colony man with mechanical skill happened to be in the program, cars and trucks from the ministry would find their way onto the concrete floor for repair. The place always carried the scent of grease, gasoline, and sawdust—the quiet smells of work that keeps a community running.

Just beyond the shop began the bridle trail, winding through the woods like a secret thread. It led us beneath tall pines, across soft beds of needles, out toward the railroad tracks, and then looped back toward the stables. The horses always knew when they were heading home. On the outward stretch they plodded, slow and steady, saving their energy. But once the trail curved and they sensed the stables ahead, their pace quickened as if pulled by some invisible memory of grain, shade, and rest.

Directly across from the stables stood a simple wooden structure we all knew as the spring. It looked like nothing more than a small shelter over a wooden box with a lid attached to a thin rope. Hanging from the side was an old long-handled tin cup—shared by everyone without a bit of concern for germs.



The Spring

If you lifted the lid, you could see leaves and bits of forest debris that had drifted down through the years, but somehow that never bothered us. The water that came from beneath was always crystal clear, icy cold, and delicious—so

refreshing that hot, tired children and adults alike happily drank their fill.

Today, I wouldn't dream of letting my children or grandchildren drink from it. But back then, the spring water was simply part of the magic of the place. We trusted it without question, we lived through it without harm, and the memory still tastes like childhood.

As we continue our walk around the lake, we come to the dam and spillway of the Lower Lake. Uncle Paul always called it "the darn," delivering the joke with a grin every time, as though he were getting away with saying something he shouldn't. The spillway was another perfect place for Pooh Sticks, where twigs raced along the rushing water, skimming past the concrete braces that flanked the runoff chute. Those braces felt like a test of bravery to us—we walked across them carefully, arms out for balance, hearts pounding as though we were tightrope walkers above a roaring river rather than a small stream of runoff.

Long before we were born, this had been the site of a sawmill known as Giberson's Mill, but no trace remained by our childhood. The mill lived only as a passed-down memory in family stories, the dam standing as the quiet remnant of a time long gone.

Beside the dam stood a wooden gazebo with benches around its edge. From there, the view was timeless: the pagoda bridge arching gently across the lake, the Big House standing watch on the opposite shore, and the still water holding the reflections of trees, sky, and seasons. That gazebo seemed to breathe with the landscape. Morning sun laid a golden path across the water; twilight draped everything in blue; nighttime wrapped the lake in velvet darkness,

pierced only by stars and the occasional glow from the Big House windows.



The slope beside the embankment was part of our everyday world. We played there, ran there, and used it as our shortcut home from the school bus. It didn't matter that the dirt road was easier; the lake path was magic, and magic always wins.

Just before reaching our house—and what later became the Volz house—a side road branched off to the right. The bridle path wound down into an area we called simply “the dump.” Perhaps it once had been used as such, though by our time the actual dumping ground was farther away from the lake. Whatever its history, to us it was another playground.

On one side rose a steep embankment that felt like a mountain when we were small. Its face was carved out in a sharp incline, probably by a bulldozer years before, and to us it looked daring and

immense. The hill was made almost entirely of heavy clay—the same rich kind once used in Pine Barrens pottery, molded into bowls and dishes by hands long gone.

To us, the clay was less art and more adventure. We'd scramble up the slope, trying to reach the top without slipping, our shoes sliding down with streaks of wet earth. The clay clung to our clothes and hands, staining us the color of the land itself and giving Mom extra battles on laundry day. She took it in stride. Dirt was simply part of childhood at Keswick, and clay was the signature we wore home.

The house I think of as the Volz house was built in the late 1960s for Uncle Paul and his family. Uncle Paul served as Operations Manager for many years, keeping the place running much like the steady hum at the heart of a machine.

The house was one of four built by the developers of Crestwood Village, exchanged for a portion of Keswick land. Two stood beside ours on the lake side of the road, and the other two sat across the highway—simple homes built so that the ministry could welcome younger families to the staff.

I'll speak of our own house in another section, but the lake side of the road was full of small landmarks that shaped our childhood. One of them was a "dock" made from an old diving board, mounted on posts sunk deep into the lakebed. It creaked beneath our weight, but to us it was the perfect place to lace up ice skates on winter afternoons, when the lake froze into glass thick enough to trust. In summer it became a place to sit and dream, our feet dangling over ripples, or to tie off our rowboat for a few minutes while we imagined we were explorers headed somewhere far. Eventually the diving

board was replaced with a sturdier dock, but the original remains the one that lives most vividly in my mind.

To the left of the dock stood a cluster of cedar trees that made the perfect pretend house. Their branches formed walls, and the shadowy interior became whatever we needed it to be—kitchen, fortress, secret hideaway. If the dock was where we dreamed, the cedars were where we built those dreams from pine needles and imagination.

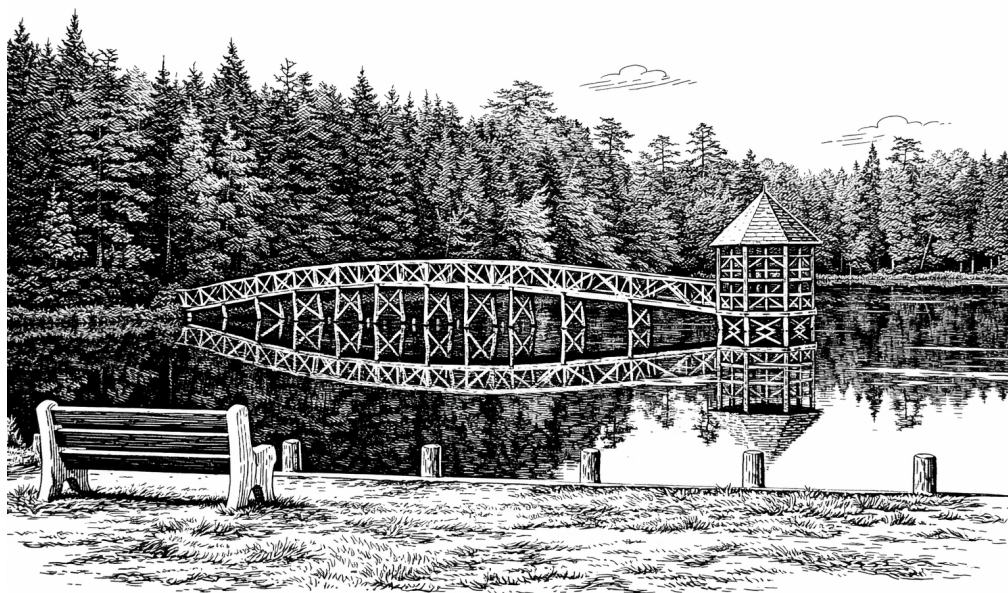
My mother once had the inspired idea of sinking an old bathtub halfway into the ground beside the sidewalk up to our house and turning it into a fishpond. It looked promising at first, but no one thought to add aeration, plants, or anything resembling actual fish care. Leaves collected in its bottom like a soggy blanket. To me, that seemed easy enough to fix: the pond simply needed fish.

I didn't like using hooks or worms, so I devised a gentler method. Back then, plastic sandwich bags had flaps rather than zippers. I found a broken fishing pole, punched a hole through the bag's flap, tied a line through it, and set out to catch sunfish.

Sunnies build tidy nests of sand along the lake bottom, distinct from the usual muck. I would lower the submerged bag into a nest and wait, perfectly still, until a curious fish swam in. Then I would pull it up like a triumph and empty it gently into the bathtub pond. Over time, I caught perhaps ten of them this way, each one delivered to the pond like a hopeful offering.

Unfortunately, my kindness did not extend to proper fish care. One by one, the sunnies died in their stagnant, leaf-filled home, victims of my well-meant ingenuity. When the last one floated belly-up, my baggie fishing career ended with them, and the fishpond returned to being nothing more than a bathtub full of soggy leaves.

A little farther along stood the pagoda bridge—a wooden structure reaching gracefully out into the lake, with a roofed sitting area at its end, benches circling beneath its shelter. A path led to it from the road, and it was always a favorite spot for guests, families, and residents to sit quietly, letting the lake offer whatever peace or reflection they needed.



The Pagoda Bridge

In winter, the pagoda became a skating destination, its posts supporting the roof like a welcoming beacon to children on skates. In summer evenings, it was a romantic idea—until the bats claimed it. They tucked themselves in under the rafters like tiny, sleeping guardians, reminding us that nature shared its beauty with whoever happened to be there, whether or not we approved of its chosen occupants.

Swans were always part of our Lower Lake experience—for better and for worse. They lent the water a quiet elegance, gliding

with glistening white feathers that caught the sunlight as though they carried the lake's reflections on their backs. But beauty does not always mean kindness. The swans' temperaments, especially the males, were as fierce as their wings were strong. It was said they could break a person's leg with a single blow if provoked, and we believed it. They would chase canoes that strayed too near their nests and pursue anyone on shore who forgot to keep a respectful distance. We admired them from afar, knowing that some loveliness is best observed, not approached.

Across from my grandparents' house—Faith Cottage, as everyone called it—grew a beautiful stretch of lily of the valley, crowding right up to the edge of the road. Their tiny, bell-shaped blooms dangled like miniature lanterns, releasing a fragrance so sweet it could stop you in your tracks. We gathered them carefully for bouquets, especially when the violets bloomed nearby, purple and shy against the spring grass.

In June, the mountain laurel bushes erupted into clouds of pale pink blossoms. Their blooms came just in time to decorate the arbor for my sister Judee's wedding, turning the grounds into a floral sanctuary beneath the summer sun. Even now, whenever mountain laurel opens in the woods, I am briefly returned to that day—sunlight on petals, laughter on the lawn, the scent of blossoms drifting across the lake.

Rounding the curve toward the Big House lawn, a graceful weeping willow rose from the green expanse, its long branches trailing like ribbons toward the earth. At one time, the canoe docks sat directly in the center of the bank, but later they were moved to nestle beneath the willow's sweeping boughs. There, they felt

like hidden invitations—canoes rocked in shadow while sunlight shimmered just beyond.

The view from that lawn, looking down toward the pagoda bridge and across the lake, never failed to quiet the heart. In early morning, if you rose in time, the sunrise spilled across the water in vibrant color, the lake holding the light as if reluctant to let it go. Other times a soft mist lifted from the surface, enveloping everything in a muted mystery, the world rendered gentle and hushed. Both beauty and stillness seemed to belong to the lake, offered freely to whoever happened to witness them.

Large cedar trees lined the water's edge as the shoreline curved back toward the wooden bridge where our walk began. Their shadows traced the bank like a natural border, ushering us once more toward the familiar scent of pines and the quiet hum of the lake. And just like that, we have returned to where we started—full circle, with the path having revealed not only the landscape of the Lower Lake, but the world that shaped our childhood.

The Lower Lake remains exactly where it has always been, yet none of us are the same. The paths are quieter now, the playhouses gone or changed, the faces different. But the water still reflects the sky, the cedars still lean toward the shore, and the chapel bell still echoes across the property on Sunday mornings.

I no longer walk those trails as a child, but they walk through me. They surface in memories, in certain smells of pine and earth, in the way I pause at lakes and listen for something more. What we lived there turned into stories long before we had words to tell them.

This lake held so much of our becoming. And perhaps that is why a simple walk around its edge can still feel like returning home.

The Upper Lake—Summer's Playground

If the Lower Lake held the quiet heart of our childhood, the Upper Lake was its laughter. It was the first thing you saw when you arrived at Keswick, stretching wide and open, as though welcoming you into its story. Its beauty was immediate and accessible—sunlight glinting across the water, children's voices skipping over the surface like stones, and the steady rhythm of splashing, paddling, and play.

Where the Lower Lake invited pondering and wandering, the Upper Lake invited belonging. It was where families gathered, cousins met nearly every afternoon, and friendships formed on docks, rowboat seats, and sandy shores. The water was cedar-brown and familiar, staining bathing suits but never our desire to plunge back in. Summer after summer, we grew up there—building castles that collapsed as quickly as they were made, daring challenges we never should have attempted, and discovering that joy has a way of living in the things that make no sense to adults.

The Upper Lake was our playground and our proving ground. It taught us to swim, to risk, to explore, and to hold tight to the fleeting magic of summer days that seem as if they will go on forever. It was where childhood felt most alive.

One of the first sights that greets anyone entering Keswick is the Upper Lake. The road curves past tall rhododendrons, and then the landscape opens to reveal the water—wide, calm, and edged by trees. A small island sits toward the far side like a jaunty beret on a smooth head, adding a touch of whimsy to the otherwise mirror-like surface. In summer, the beach and lake became a world of laughter and splashing. In quieter hours, when guest groups drifted away, the

water turned contemplative, inviting stillness. Some of the most breathtaking sunsets settled over this lake, staining the ripples with golds and reds before fading into muted blues and grays as the sun slipped below the treetops.

We built endless sandcastles along the shore, carving canals, digging moats, and doing our best to keep the whole structure from crumbling into the soft sand. If we caught a tiny fish or guppy, we sometimes added it to the moat, convinced this elevated the majesty of our creation. The water offered its own toys, the best of which was “the log”—a smooth tree trunk, perhaps five feet long, that had been worn satin-soft by countless seasons in the lake. It floated as our boat, balance beam, and thrillingly unstable ride. Was it safe? Not at all. Was it fun? Absolutely.

Our cousins, the Whitfields, lived across the highway and joined us nearly every afternoon the lake was open. While our mothers sat on the sand and chatted, we created kingdoms in the water and on the shore, needing nothing more than sun, sand, and imagination.

The beach sloped gently into the lake, shallow for a long stretch before finally dropping off near the diving dock. It was the perfect place to learn to swim—no sudden depths, just a gradual invitation into deeper water. The lake’s color, a light brown tint, came not from dirt but from tannic acid released by cedar trees and the iron-rich soil beneath. Cedar water is iconic in the Pine Barrens: earthy, tea-colored, and beloved by those who know it. It might startle newcomers, but once you’d swum in it, you understood. The only drawback was its permanence on white fabric. The moment you dove in, any white bathing suit turned a warm shade of amber. You learned not to fight it.

During stretches of summer heat, the Upper Lake could grow uncomfortably warm, like water left too long in the sun. But the lake was fed not only by streams; hidden springs bubbled beneath. When the water felt like bathwater, we roamed slowly, toes searching for the telltale chill of a spring. It left no trace on the surface, but the moment you stood above it, the cold rose through you, a secret refuge you never wanted to leave.

One year a nearby beach town dismantled two towering sliding boards and donated them to Keswick. They were rebuilt at the shallow end of the lake, instantly transforming the summer.

The slides stood about thirty feet high, narrow and steep, with cold water cascading down their chutes to keep riders from sticking in the heat. The climb up the ladder seemed to last forever, and at the top you had the startling realization of just how high you were. The drop looked nearly vertical to young eyes.

Early that first summer, someone discovered that if you hung from the support bar positioned above the top of the slide, swung yourself out, and dropped in partway down while reclining, you could glide much farther across the water at the bottom. What began as a daring stunt quickly became an unofficial sport. People lined the ladders, waiting their turn to see how far they could skim across the lake's surface. Bathing suits were sacrificed at an alarming rate that year.

Chuck Tompkins and Liz Mason emerged as the undisputed champions of that first summer. Chuck wore out so many bathing suits that he eventually asked Liz to sew a washcloth onto the back of his "sliding suit," a patch of reinforcement for a legend in the making. It was loud, reckless, joyful lunacy, and somehow no

one came to true harm—unless you counted scraped hands from grabbing the sides or the occasional backward tumble at the end.



Many brave souls made the long climb to the top of the sliding board only to sit there frozen with fear. From below, the slide looked thrilling, but from above it seemed nearly vertical—as if one wrong move might send you plummeting into the hospital, or worse. It wasn't unusual for a crowd to gather at the bottom, calling encouragement upward in a mixture of teasing and sympathy. Eventually some would release their white-knuckled grip, slide down,

and emerge grinning, astonished by the fun they'd nearly missed. Others, defeated by terror, would scoot carefully backward down the long ladder, apologetically holding up the entire line.

I found my own way to conquer the fear. I would sneak over when the slide stood empty, sit at the bottom, and push myself up as far as my arms could manage without losing my grip. Then I'd let go and glide back down—half rider, half coward, but undeniably having fun. Over time, I worked my way to starting from the top, though I never dared to swing out from the support bar the way my sister Karen, our neighbor Joni Volz, and the boldest sliders did. Even without their acrobatics, I managed to skim across the lake quite far, which I told myself proved that swinging out wasn't necessary at all. (Whether that was true or simply self-preservation is still debatable.) One of my most cherished memories of the slides involved Dr. Al Platt, one of Keswick's beloved speakers and a dear family friend. His daughter Brendy had cerebral palsy, and every summer he carried her up that seemingly endless ladder. Brendy was not small as she grew up, yet he lifted her as if strength and love were the same thing. Together they would sit at the top, and with Brendy held securely in his lap, down they would go—laughing, gliding, landing with a splash that felt triumphant. To this day, I do not know how he managed it safely each time, but he did. He gave her the joy of the slide just as he gave her the joy of being included in every part of life he could. That memory still shines brighter than the sun on the lake.

Eventually, many years later, the insurance company deemed the slides too dangerous, and Keswick was forced to remove them. Their disappearance left the shoreline strangely calm. It felt like

a chapter closing, not just in summer recreation but in childhood itself. The day the slides came down was a sad one, and the lake has never quite forgotten their wild, wonderful presence.

Just beyond the slides stretched the diving dock: a narrow platform with a few benches and a solitary lifeguard chair watching over the deep water. A second section reached farther out into the lake, ending in a diving board that hovered like a dare above the dark cedar depths. We learned to dive from the lower platform first, easing into the practice the way one learns to trust a new friend—tentatively, with more splashing than grace. The idea of tipping headfirst into murky tea-colored water seemed unthinkable at first, as though the unknown below might swallow us whole. But with time, and no small amount of encouragement from braver swimmers, diving became as natural as breathing. What once felt like a leap into fear turned into the satisfying thrill of slicing cleanly into the water, cedar-scented and cold against our skin.

The diving dock became a different sort of landmark as we grew older. It was no longer just a place to perfect our dives or show off cannonballs—it became a spot to linger, talk, and pretend we were almost-grown. I can still picture one particular summer afternoon, hands curled around the edge of the dock, feet kicking slowly beneath the surface, when a boy asked me to “go steady.” It felt like a moment of romance lifted straight from a movie—until he never spoke to me again. Technically, I suppose we are still going steady, since we never officially broke up.

Middle school romance: dramatic in the moment, comedic in the retelling.

In time, I traded childhood crushes for a whistle and a lifeguard chair on that same dock. My sister Karen did the same. Today, Keswick posts multiple guards on duty, but back then it was common to have just one person responsible for everything: the beach, the slides, the diving area, and the boats. When inner-city guest groups visited, the lake filled with hundreds of excited “swimmers” and would-be boaters, many of whom were convinced they could swim or row—even when it was clear they could not. On one unforgettable afternoon, I never sat down once during the entire swim time. My whistle barely left my lips as I raced from one potential disaster to the next.

Eventually Uncle Paul came to check on me, no doubt alerted by the constant shrill notes echoing across the lake. He ended up staying for the rest of the afternoon, helping restore order to the chaos. After that summer, the wisdom of having more than one lifeguard became undeniable. It turns out that even lakes, like childhood, grow safer with a few extra watchful eyes.

Just before the boat dock stood a small platform that looked more like an oddly shaped picnic table than anything nautical. It sat low over the sand with benches along each side, and its purpose was wonderfully practical: it was where we dried our feet. After hours of swimming, sliding, and diving, we climbed onto it to sit in the sun, letting our toes bake warm and clean before slipping back into shoes or heading into the nearby bath houses. It was a humble little structure, but it marked the transition from lake freedom to whatever came next—dinner, chores, or simply walking home with sandy hair and tired arms.

The true boat dock stretched a little farther out, just beyond the buoy lines that separated swimmers from boaters. It held space for

six vessels—usually four rowboats and two paddleboats—each tied loosely as though they were half eager to drift away. In those days, when I was young, boaters were allowed to venture behind the island, a mysterious realm beyond the lifeguard's view. No rules stopped us from rowing out of sight; it was simply assumed we'd return.

Behind the island felt like entering another world entirely. The water grew darker, cooler, quieter. Tree stumps from the lake's creation still jutted up like relics from an earlier forest.

Snapping turtles lurked beneath the surface, smooth-shelled and ancient, and blue herons stalked the shallows with regal patience, barely acknowledging our presence. It was wild and still back there, and we felt like explorers rather than children with borrowed boats.

Eventually the insurance company decided that unsupervised exploration was too risky, and the rule changed: no more rowing behind the island. But for those of us who once slipped into that hidden stretch of water, the memory remains—how vast and secret it felt, as though we had discovered a part of childhood that belonged to us alone.

My parents bought a small Sunfish sailboat when I was young, and to me it seemed impossibly adventurous. I remember sitting between them as we skimmed toward the area near the spillway, convinced we were about to plunge over the edge and disappear forever. The water was calm, the boat barely moving, but the certainty of childhood fear is stronger than logic. We survived, of course, and eventually graduated to a Hobie monocat—a curious blend of catamaran and dinghy, with a molded hull and deck instead of pontoons and canvas.



Sailing on the Upper Lake was nothing like sailing on open water. The lake was shallow in unexpected places, and the wind was as moody as a teenager—shifting directions with no warning, dropping to nothing, then gusting out of nowhere with mischievous force. I have often thought that if you could learn to sail on the Keswick lake, you could sail just about anywhere.

The challenge built skill, and the beauty built devotion. My passion for sailing was born not on a wide, predictable ocean, but on a fickle little lake hemmed in by pine trees.

The boat usually rested beached just beyond the rowboat dock. I loved being on it, tacking back and forth across the narrow stretch of water, because tacking was practically all one could do.

Finding the wind was a sport in itself. Sometimes it arrived like a gift, sometimes like a prank.

One afternoon, a surprise gust hit just as I shifted my weight. The sail sheet jammed in the claw cleat, refusing to release, and the boat lurched so violently that I was launched backward in an involuntary flip straight into the lake.

The shock of cold cedar water was nothing compared to the indignity of watching the boat continue without me. Its sail billowed triumphantly, and it sailed on—rudderless, captainless, utterly confident—while I sputtered in its wake. Now it makes me laugh to picture myself bobbing there in water the color of tea, watching my boat flee like a startled animal. At the time, however, I was less amused. But that is the gift of memory: disappointment turns into comedy if you give it enough years and enough distance.

Just beyond the beach and bathhouses lay the picnic grounds, shaded by tall pines and scented, in summer, with smoke and chicken. This was the site of the famous barbecues my mother began after learning the technique from the



Ocean County Agricultural Center. The process required long wire racks laid across charcoal pits, each rack fitted with poles so it could be flipped like a giant page in a cookbook. Two racks sandwiched the chicken—one beneath, one on top—never slathered with red barbecue sauce, which I suspect my mother would have considered nothing less than culinary blasphemy.

Instead, she used a marinade so flavorful that people from the surrounding towns bought tickets each week during summer conferences, just to taste it. She started the coals at a precise time every afternoon. When they reached the perfect glow, she and her chosen helpers—usually two summer staff boys—laid the chicken

on the racks. Mom stood by, timing everything with exacting care, calling out “Turn!” like a drill sergeant with a stopwatch. The boys would lift the second rack and flip the chicken over the pit as she sprayed each piece with what we all called “the magic sauce.” Then she would sit with a book, waiting for the next turn, repeating the ritual every twenty minutes for hours. It was hot, tedious work, but the result was the most tender, savory chicken I have ever tasted. I’m convinced no five-star restaurant could compete.

Sometimes my sisters and I were pressed into watermelon duty, carving the rind into a basket for fruit salad. The rest of the meal—corn on the cob, baked beans, and cornbread baked in the Big House kitchen—rounded out a feast that felt too perfect to be served on paper plates.

Two paths led from the picnic grounds toward the island bridge. The more interesting one hugged the shoreline and was often wet and mucky, a miniature ecosystem beneath our feet.

Alongside the familiar cedars and pines grew unusual treasures; pitcher plants with tubular bodies designed to lure flies with sticky nectar, trapping them behind downward-facing hairs like prison bars. The flies, unable to escape, slowly dissolved, feeding the plant with nutrients it couldn’t gather from the poor soil—especially nitrogen. Nearby lay lush carpets of sphagnum moss and cranberry plants, remnants from when the lake had once been part of a cranberry bog.

The second path ran straighter and drier, and its most delightful feature was an abundance of wild blueberry bushes. We rarely walked that path without coming away with stained fingers and a handful of berries we popped into our mouths as we went.

The bridge to the island arched gracefully over the water, high enough for rowboats to pass beneath back when they were allowed. The island's main feature was the prayer tower, a wooden platform raised on sturdy poles with simple benches circling its perimeter. It had a roof overhead and nothing more—no ornament, no preaching station, just quiet. My friend Donna insists it was a popular, secret make-out spot for summer staffers, even though dating was discouraged. I never experienced that side of the tower, but I knew it as a lovely place to pray or daydream, or both.

The path continued around the Upper Lake, winding past more cranberry and blueberry plants, eventually leading toward the railroad tracks before ducking back into the woods. It was common to spot blue heron along that stretch, especially near the small bridges that crossed soggy ground too wet to walk through. Just before the path emerged near the entrance drive was one of my favorite places on earth—a raised patch of shoreline overlooking the quiet side of the lake. It felt like a sanctuary. The air always seemed sweeter there, the breeze softer, and the sky bluer. I would sit for long stretches, thinking or not thinking at all, simply letting the lake hold me in silence.

The Upper Lake was never quiet for long. It echoed with splashes, laughter, shouts from lifeguards, the scrape of rowing oars against metal, and the sizzle of chicken turning on racks at the picnic grounds. Even its wind seemed to play tricks on us—changing direction just when we thought we understood it. Growing up beside this lake meant growing up inside movement: learning to swim, to steer, to dive, to sail, to climb, to feed a crowd, to carve watermelon baskets, and sometimes to overcome our fears in slow, stubborn increments.