

Castle Park... A Resort in the Romantic Tradition

By Jane Idema (1979)

Transcribed by Martha Laughna (2019)

Living in legend, in myth and in solemn, documented history, the New England villages with their white Congregational churches and village squares, the raw western towns with their saloons and general stores, and the plantations of the old South, have their rightful place in the imaginations of Americans. Less renowned in movie scripts and novels, but an important part of middle America's heritage, are the famous resorts strung along the western (eastern) shore of Lake Michigan.

They were founded in the two or three decades following the Civil War to enable families to vacation in quiet, wooded areas, away from such growing urban centers as Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis and Cincinnati. These resorts, with poetic names like Sylvan Beach, Michilliada and Macatawa Park, retain the sense of community of small towns from the rural past. Each has its own traditions, private jokes and royal families.

Just 38 miles from Grand Rapids, between Holland and Saugatuck, is one such resort—Castle Park. Here the fifth generation of descendants of the first Castle Parkers now toddles along the lake shore.

To understand and enjoy Castle Park, vacationers must suspend the functions of the rational mind and ignore present realities. In this summer Never-Never Land, the energy exists or inflation is not worth mentioning. What really matters is the Saturday afternoon baseball game, the morning tennis match, and a lively game of charades on a friend's front porch after the sun goes down.

Castle Park derives its name from a beige brick building constructed like a European castle by one Michael Schwarz who left Germany after a bitter experience in the Franco-Prussian war. He sought and found his fortune in the real estate business in Chicago. As legend has it, he wanted to set up his own feudal estate in the New World so that he might shield his six daughters from the bewildering ways of a swiftly developing industrial society. It is said that one

of the daughters left this new ancestral home to elope with a Dutch lad from nearby Holland, but was later caught by her stern father. Her ghost, as whispered by Castle Park children around beach fires on moonlit nights, sometimes appears in the window of the Castle tower.

After a few years, the Schwarz family abandoned this isolated home and, in 1893, John H. Parr, headmaster of the Chicago Preparatory School, bought the Castle for use as a summertime camp for boys and girls of his school. Parents of Mr. Parr's pupils, who visited their children during the Michigan summer, were the first families to build cottages on the dunes surrounding the Castle. Mr. Parr soon converted his summer camp to a summer hotel.

Unlike many Michigan resorts, where all the cottages overlook the lake, the first cottages at Castle Park were built on the ridges of dunes running perpendicular to the beach for protection from prevailing westerly winds. Although a few cottages are on Lake Michigan, the majority are strung out on three ridges running eastward, creating two large campuses for tennis courts, baseball diamonds, horseshoe pits and, years ago, a small golf course. Community buildings erected on the campuses—a meeting house for vesper services, a candy and ice cream store call "The Barnswallow" and a dance floor built on the top of a dune provided opportunities for Castle Parkers to gather and helped create a strong community feeling.

In 1917, Carter P. Brown and his wife Marian, bought the Castle from his uncle, John Parr. A creative and energetic man, Brown was the central hero of the Castle Park saga. For several years he also owned the Pinecrest Inn in Tryon, North Carolina, and he created and aura of the South in his new northern resort.

The formal front parlor of the Castle, with an old piano, antique walnut chests and ancestral portraits over a classical fireplace, is a room right out of "Gone with the Wind". In a downstairs dining room called

the Old Timers' Room, the rough, hand-hewn tables and chairs, a huge fireplace with hanging copper cooking pans and bowls, and kerosene lamps suggest a country inn in the mountains of North Carolina.

To complete the illusion of a southern inn, Mr. Brown imported young men from southern universities to serve as waiters at the Castle. Students from the University of Georgia, the Citadel, the University of Tennessee and the University of the South at Sewanee, Tennessee, joined in all the activities of the resort and formed part of the famous Castle Park baseball teams of the late 30s.

Mr. Brown had studied architecture in his college days and after refurbishing the Castle, he built many of the newer cottages which are perched on the outlying dunes north and south of the central campuses. He had spent years buying the weathered gray wood of old barns from abandoned farms in the rural areas of Allegan and Ottawa counties and he used it for the cottages he built during the 40s and 50s. Although fairly new, these cottages reflect the mood of an earlier pioneer era, suggested by timber beams, large brick fireplaces and rag rugs. Until his death a year ago (1978), Mr. Brown spent his days out-of-doors beautifying his beloved Castle Park, planting a cutting garden beside the Castle or tucking rock-garden flowers in a stone fence along the road.

Through the years, the spirit of Castle Park has been a vigorous one, with short shrift for the lazy and full honors for the athletic and high-spirited. The Castle bell, which tolls relentlessly at eight o'clock each morning, awakens Castle guests and cottagers alike to a new day.

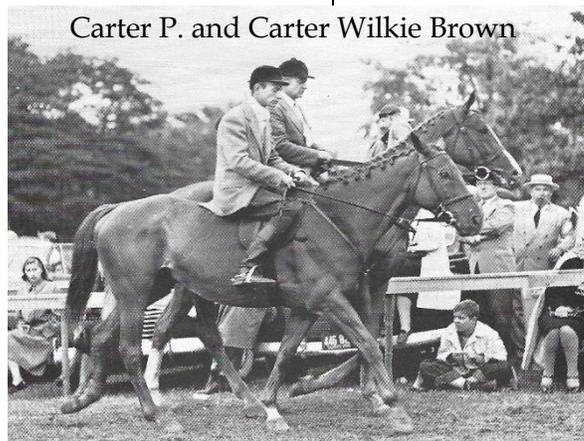
In the spirit of a family camp, activities are organized for all ages. The youngest generation, ranging from active three-year-olds to bold ten-year-olds, is bundled off to a Castle Park institution called Play Class. Originally organized because the children of the first cottages broke some windows in an abandoned schoolhouse, the Play Class now serves the dual

purpose of providing a morning of group recreation for the young and an opportunity for their mothers to spend the morning on the tennis courts.

To a certain extent, Play Class activities depend on the imagination of the leaders, usually teen-age members of Castle Park families who had themselves spent summer mornings in Play Class in younger days. Favorite activities are treasure hunts, with directions scribbled on slips of paper: "go to the flagpole and look under a rock," or scavenger hunts which disperse the children to beg at cottage doors for "three safety pins, a spool of black thread, and a new-minted nickel."

When their energy begins to flag at the end of the morning, the children have a story hour and time to browse in a of classic children's books and select a book of their choice to take back to their cottages. The library is a memorial to the late Gertrude Wilcox of Grand Rapids, whose great interest was children's books. Mrs. Wilcox established the library in her own cottage to encourage children to read during the summer months and the fine collection is now in the meeting house in the center of the Campus.

In the earlier days of Castle Park—the 20s, 30s, and



40s—horseback riding was a central activity. Mr. Brown brought spirited thoroughbred hunters from Tryon to the stable behind the Castle and riding enthusiasts of all ages tested their mettle on steeds a bit more noble than the placid hack horses in stables at home. Occasionally, a group of riders followed the trails in the woods behind the dunes as far as Goshorn Lake near

Saugatuck for a morning breakfast cookout or an evening picnic.

The end of summer always brought the renowned Castle Park Horse Show with riders coming from all over Michigan and other midwestern states to participate in a well-managed and judged amateur show held on the park grounds. Castle Park young people helped to organize the show by putting up the jumps and buying the trophies. In the most spectacular and challenging final event of the show,

riders clad in hunting pink rode an outside course over difficult jumps set around the castle grounds. Even the most experienced riders sometime took a hard fall when a horse slipped or refused a jump.

In recent years, tennis has replaced riding as the most popular activity for the resorters of all ages. From early in the morning until dusk, the clip-clop of tennis balls on the nine clay tennis courts sound as tennis players serve, volley, hit forehands and backhands, shout with joy over a well-placed shot and curse (silently!) over a poor shot. At six or seven years of age, youngsters begin to bounce tennis balls and hit balls against a screen to help their hand and foot coordination.

In the fifties and early sixties, a kindly and wise tennis coach, Harry Leighton, affectionately known as Cap, taught a whole generation of young Castle Parkers not only tennis but, more important, perseverance and good sportsmanship. Cap Leighton believed that children should start tennis very young with simple ball exercises. He had the opportunity to tell others about his theories when he was asked to bring some of his young pupils to demonstrate his teaching technique during an intermission at the Forest Hills Tennis tournament.

In the freshness of the summer mornings, adults are on the courts early. At four courts on the south campus, the best tennis players play hard, serious and good tennis. On the north campus tennis courts, intermediate players are a little more casual and have an unusual protocol. Anyone who appears at the courts is cut into a set of tennis. This inclusion of everyone leads to unusual combinations of old friends and strangers, nephews and uncles, aunts and nieces playing doubles with each other. More than one gentleman has played into his early 80s with younger friends. The wife of one of them protested, "You are going to die on the tennis court!" To which he calmly replied, "My dear, my only fear is that I won't!"

Until recently, daily activities included horseshoes for the men of the post-retirement generation. At the

clay horseshoe pits, competitors would spend hours trying for that ringer, solemnly measuring the distance from a fallen horseshoe to the stake. When his back grew too stiff to lean over, one avid player devised an ingenious way to lift up the horseshoe, using a pole with a hook on the end. As part of the Labor Day festivities at the end of summer, amiable friends became fierce competitors as they vied for the coveted title of Castle Park Horseshoe Champion and the Diamond Horseshoe trophy.

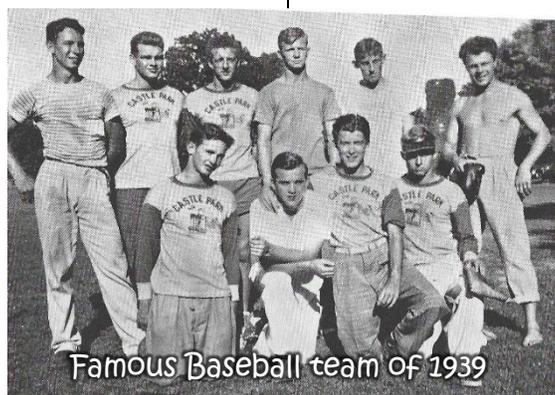


For a companionable group of women of the same generation, the morning activity has been long walks on the beach, south toward Saugatuck in fair weather and hikes along the back roads and wooded trails on cooler or rainy days. Mary Nobel of St. Louis, mother of Platt Nobel, who is now a Grand Rapids resident, was the leader of this dedicated troop of nature lovers, identifying the wild flowers and migrating birds as the seasons progressed from the long-awaited spring to the golden days of October. Many years ago, Mrs. Nobel was the first naturalist at the park to notice and lament the diminishing number of sea gulls and the increasing pollution of Lake Michigan.

During July and August, the Saturday afternoon baseball games have been an uninterrupted tradition for over 50 years. Presently, the players are the Castle

Park men of all ages. Teen-age boys are initiated into adulthood when they move from the old Play Class ball teams to the adult teams. The heyday of Castle Park baseball, however was between 1928 and World War II, when a great team of Castle Park you men played hardball against teams from the nearby resorts of Macatawa, Ottawa Beach and

Waukezoo. An even older tradition than baseball are the dances held every Saturday night, originally in the dining room of the Castle and, since 1936, on the dance dune overlooking the lake. The children's dance precedes the adult dance, with the younger generation throwing themselves without inhibition



Famous Baseball team of 1939

into the latest dance fads, the Big Apple and the hokey Pokey in days gone by and, more recently, a broom dance and the Caribbean hat dance. The finale of the children's dance is a grand march in which everyone—children, parents, grandparents—forms a chain and marches briskly to medleys of old marching songs.

Sunday night Vespers, started by the founder of Castle Park, John Parr, end the strenuous weekends on a quiet note, with interfaith worship services led by ministers from surrounding towns and occasionally, by a native son who has entered the ministry.

As the days grow shorter toward the end of August, the amphitheatre, tucked in a ravine set back in the woods, comes to life. Modeled after the theatres of the ancient Greeks and designed by a former Castle guest, J. Wellington Reynolds (nicknamed Sir Josh), a figure (?) painter at the Art Institute of Chicago, the amphitheatre is the perfect setting for a vaudeville show called the Castle Park Capers. Some summers the waiters and Pixies, young women who also work at the Castle, have been members of the Glee Club of the University of Tennessee. In these years, the music was very professional, with some original songs and others from popular Broadway musicals. More often, however, strictly amateur talent of the resorters surfaces and includes old camp songs like, "The Itty Bitty Spider Climbed Up the Water Spout" by the preschool group, and mimes of their elders sitting on the beach by the observant teen-age group. One of the repeat hits of the Capers was an act in which a doctor and his wife, who had been brought up in Arkansas, dressed like mountain folk and rasped out, "The Little Brown Church in the Wildwood."

In these waning days of a Michigan summer, a group of friends, called the Old Timers—men and women who grew up at Castle Park in the innocent age between the roaring 20s and the explosive years of World War II—hold an annual potluck dinner crowned by a fierce game of charades. All year long, the Old Timers watch the titles of new movies, clip out the reviews of new books, watch for new advertising slogans, and recall the names of obscure songs from the swing era. Armed with this intellectual potpourri, they come prepared for the game they have played together for 45 years!

The Labor Day barbecue is the final festivity of the resort season. For this final weekend of the summer, young adults who may be half a continent away, or adventuring abroad, return like homing pigeons. The night before Labor Day, fires are lit in the barbecue pit behind the dance dune, and at about 10 in the evening, a whole pig is laid upon cross poles above the coals with great ceremony. Someone starts to strum a guitar, someone else pulls out a mouth organ, everyone sings.

On this magic night, the children are allowed to stay up until all hours. Inhaling the pungent odor of the sizzling pork, they cluster around the barbecue pit. The glow of the firelight softens the faces of the older generation as they greet old friends, talking and laughing. The next day at noon, everyone gathers for the final outdoor barbecue. After lunch come the sad "goodbyes" as families leave for city homes. By evening most of the cottages will be locked, dark and strangely empty.

The children wonder how the summer passed so quickly. Their elders sigh and wonder how so many summers passed so quickly.

