

The Ice Bridge
01-18-2010 by Harry Zirkelbach

Bobby Whelan and me were joined at the hip, certain to get into trouble. We tended to be inseparable away from school, the four months we were neighbors; then, our family moved away.

And we were pals too, those four months, fall and early winter, those final months of the Hoover presidency.

We met in the 6th Grade, St. Ann's School, Erie, Pennsylvania. when our family migrated from Marion Hill Pennsylvania, one hundred miles and a world south. We both were small in size, inquiring minds that sought adventure outside of school hours.

Our families lived near one another, were not socially acquainted. I sometimes ate at his house, he at mine. I liked his Mom, never met his Dad, and with Bobby it was the reciprocal.

Our homes were five blocks from the Great Lake. Because life on the streets was routine, every block looking a bit like another, we gravitated down to the Lakes edge, staring across its flat surface, having been told that Canada was 30 miles away, unseen, just beyond that horizon.

We were in the sixth grade at St Ann's School which was behind the Church at East Tenth and East Avenue. The north end of East Avenue ended short of Lake Erie's shore. There, the land continued flat a bit further north, then an abrupt drop to a beach area that was more rocks and trash than sand all the 100 feet to the waters edge. Looking back from the water's edge the homes street and its bordering homes were not

visible because of that sharp thirty foot drop. The Erie Iron Works, irregularly dumped slag from their smelter next to the Lake. That mill melted ore, created iron. The trash, slag, was discarded east of the mill. Over previous dumps of slag from the mill, rails were laid and when a fresh melt was complete, that refuse was put into rail cars, driven to the eastern last feet of rail, the slag dumped ahead and to both sides, ever lengthening that rail bed, and the long black trash scar. The iron making process needed by industry, was dirty, a source of continual Lake pollution. The occasional substantial fence divided the residential and commercial water front.

When the Erie Iron Works West was operational, it spewed dark smoke, occasional tongue of fire. To any young mind, a scene from hell.

This stretch of beach was rocky, the water not fit for swimming in summer. The water looked ugly-green gooey in winter. Visitors had left trash, not footprint. And where the berm was several foot high, the city had ended an East Avenue 60" sewer line. This hole disposed of run-off and trash of every imaginable kind from industry, the street, homes, onto this section of the shore. The emission from the pipe was foul, ugly, smelly, dead; not a pretty sight. The sewer end was open, not screened, and sometimes Bobby and me walked into the foul sewer an unreasonable length, keeping out tennies out of the foul bottom content by straddling the wall with feet astride, hands doing the same at the top. We only give up the journey when that days leader became nauseous or scared, tells the other, we turn

around rush to the light, holding our breath imagining the pungent gases and liquids could eat our lungs or worse.

To the East no homes were visible, just the Erie Lighthouse, built the earlier Century to direct mariners to the entrance of the substantial Harbor created by the Peninsula. Then the very tall Hammermill Paper plant double smoke stacks, where continuously, whiff of smoke trailed lightly with the wind of that moment. Hammermill had permits to extracted fresh water from Lake Erie in their process to make the paper from wood pulp. For this, Hammermill had built two man-made rock islands in the Lake,. Inside these isles, was the intake equipment to draw the required water for their manufacturing. The isle nearest shore one was 1/4 mile into the Lake, the other maybe two mile off shore. Visitors were not permitted on either, seldom seen to these small man-made isles.

The Lake view changed regularly with the winter cold, storms. With each snow, a scene of purity emerged on the land, ice on the waters edge until melting began; most this snowfall was blackened by commerce and people, before melting

On any visit, our curiosity plunged into that whitish beach, blue-water, world. The constant lapping of the water onto the beach identified the shoreline; east a straight line to that horizon, west the shore swung in a northern arc to the north to the invisible entrance to the Erie Bay.

On snowy days, the blue lake gobbled each snowdrop as it fell.

After hours of cold weather, ice began forming at the water's edge, grow rapidly, collect into ever larger pieces. When wind was from the north and west, (the fisherman's favorable on-shore breeze) a critical mass, as ice sheets, would be driven ashore haphazardly, each wave adding that piece atop piles of ice already on this rocky beach at the foot of East Avenue. When Bobby and me walked here, and the top ice cover cracked, we would scurry ashore to avoid falling into the cold Lake. Yes, we'd get wet some days.

One February after school, after days of continuous cold weather, Bobby and me hike down to the shore. The scene, novel. A Continuous ice pack covered the usually bluish water Lake. A brisk freezing wind met our faces. We walked a good distance onto this ice. Jumped up and down. It was a solid uneven surface. The driving wind had broken ice into sheets which rode over the ice further inshore, making a jagged ice field. Whatever water that had been between the pieces had become the weld that held each piece to its neighbor. We were sure to cold breeze helped. In places ice made mounds that heaped to several feet above the Lake floor, were taller than us. This world was quiet. We alone shared it. Our platform seemed a solid, gently undulating mass that we could jump upon, climb, or walk around. It was a bumpy road to anywhere.

What a challenge this presented..

One suggests a long walk on the ice. "Let's go" from the other.

The whitish blue ice matched the sky that day., hiding horizons. There is not hint of any life but we two, as we begin our journey away from the shore.

To the Northeastern horizon there were the two “blips” of the Hammermill islands. How near could we get?

One said, “let’s try”; then away we two raced, further and further from shore. A peek back, now there is no line to show where ice became land. All south was white. Encouraged, we pile through and around mounds which became larger further from shore. Our lake view was hilly. The shore now resembling an endless smooth icing on white cake, no breaks or scars.

Ahead, ice packs continuous, tall,. We walk around and between, keeping our destination in view, the outer rock water intake, two miles off shore.

The climbing, running and walking completely captivated our minds. Tireless, the goal, “Go where no one had gone before; Walk on water. To the outer Hammermill water intake pylon”. We are now enjoying the hike, don’t recognize cold, just a goal.

Then in unmeasured time and effort, find ourselves climbing the rocks that made the intake. Atop, great white view; ice, shore, the Hammermill Paper buildings center, on either side and beyond. just more snow covering what was the land east and a bit west of Erie. We were excited, a difficult goal reached, talking at once to the other, we have no sense of cold or trouble. On our 30 x 30 ft rock island, there was a large

wooden cover, slick from its iced covering. The door on the floor was padlocked, to prevent peeking, mischief.

In fact, the only disappointment arose when we realized there was nothing to explore but the view. After a small eternity, we noted, there was nothing else to be seen, do.

No longer energized by the goal, cold crept into our mittens and clothing. It was time to retrace the ice-paved miles.

The return was dull. Except for the occasional chatter celebrating what we had done, there was plenty of minutes to let this thought this thought sink in, this was a very cold day, even with the wind partly at our back. That wind, the absence of heat from the sun, made the several mile walk just another long jaunt on a very cold day.

Finally ashore, we look northeast. The Hammermill water intake seemed even a smaller blip. We realized we had done something very different, congratulate one another. Become braggarts.

On the way up the shore berm toward home before any houses, we meet a friend from an upper grade of our school, tell him what we just did.

He refuses to believe.

However he did convince us separately ---- Tell this lie to no one. Adults would either believed punish us severely, for a change of the wind would blow this ice floe back toward

Canada with deadly consequences for us; or, simply, we'd be punished for lying about was simply impossible. The enormity of what we had done began to be recognized. When our doubting friend left us, we decided, tell no one what the view is like from the outer Hammermill water intake. Besides, you still can't see Canada.

Wonderful Bobby, my bosom buddy those four months, long dead, never able to tell what he had done that very cold February afternoon. We had biblically walked on water; two of those 30 miles toward Canada on an unstable bed of frozen water.

Yes, either we were lying or stupid.

But Bobby has remained my small giant friend forever.



We had held hands though moments of that walk, in silence
and conversation. Bobby has remained locked and heroic,
frozen in my heart all these years.

Here's to you Bobby.