

The Unfolding of Summer in Indiana

by Liz Gibbons

As a child the confirmation of the arrival of summer came to me in stages. Kicking summer off was Memorial Day. I remember it was sometimes still called Decoration Day, which was its original name. It was declared a national holiday by the commander-in-chief of the Union Army in 1868 as a day to honor and decorate the tombs of deceased Union soldiers.

I grew up in Indiana. Memorial Day was a big holiday for the Indianapolis 500 auto race was run on Memorial Day. In the weeks leading up to the race news about it appeared in the newspapers regularly, and we learned much about the favorite drivers. We listened to the Indy 500 on the radio even after TV became popular. The owners of the Motor Speedway did not allow live national TV coverage until 1986 in order to ensure high gate attendance. During the war years of 1942 to 1945 the race was cancelled. I remember in those years after the war, when I was in junior and senior high school, the coverage of the Indy 500 played on the radio in the background as I finished a term paper or project that had to be handed in the following day. We often had up to another week or more of school depending on what day of the week May 30 fell on in a particular year.

The next stage in the unfolding of summer was the last day of school. Even though I generally liked school, I felt a relief and happiness when I cleaned out my desk on the last day and knew I had three months off. When I was in the early grades I took swimming lessons in June at the Purdue Women's Athletic Building. When I was a little older my best childhood friend, Sis Bauman, and I were able to go from West Lafayette by bus to Columbian Park in Lafayette. The park had a large circular pool. The perimeter was shallow but grew deeper as you approached the center. Near the center were slides and diving boards. We spent many summer afternoons swimming there. To me that first swimming outing to the park in June confirmed that summer had fully arrived.