

12. Swimming at Blawenburg Beach

Pond was painted by Katy Seitz, a neighbor on Mountain View Road for many years. She is 101 years old and lives on Cape Cod. It was likely painted in the late 1960s or early 1970s.

Where is Blawenburg Beach?

If you ask most people in Blawenburg, especially those who have lived in the village only a few years (maybe 30 or so), if they ever went to Blawenburg Beach, they will probably laugh and say something like, "What? A beach? Where? You've got to be kidding!" But there is a pond in the western part of the village that has often been called Blawenburg Beach because it was a popular swimming hole in the 50s and 60s.

As reported in Blog 11, a pond was created on the Van Zandt farm in one day during Soil Conservation and Machinery Field Day on May 6, 1950. This event drew 8,000 people to see the latest farming equipment and techniques. The creation of the one-acre pond was done using special equipment to excavate and compact the soil on the north side of Route 518 where the land slopes down toward Rock Brook.

It was a demonstration project, so people gathered to see just how quickly this machinery could build the pond. Large scoops and dozers dug through the red shale and loam and piled it on the downslope on the north end of the pond. Compactors were used to compress the dirt and create an earthen dam to retain the water. It worked as expected and by the end of the day a pond was created, a pond that still exists today in modified form almost 70 years later.

The pond has gone by several names. Officially, it was called Van Zandt Pond; locally, it was often known as Blawenburg Pond or the Pond; and humorously, it was called Blawenburg Beach. Sand was brought in to create a

beach atmosphere, and it was used as a swimming hole in the summer and a skating rink in the coldest winter months.



Broad View Farm in 1964. The pond is on the right; used farming equipment that was sold through the J. Percy Van Zandt Co. is on the left; and the visiting Wally Byam Caravan is in the distance on what is now the Montgomery High School property. We will have more about the Caravan in a future blog.

Sunfish and Bullfrogs and Muskrats, Oh Yeah

Blawenburg Beach also provided a habitat for several varieties of fish and other wildlife. Jim Beachell grew up on nearby Neuro Psychiatric Institute, which was commonly called The Institute and now is called Skillman Park. He remembers going over to the pond with his brother, Craig, and meeting Jack Van Zandt (aka J. Percy Van Zandt III). “There were bass and sunfish there. Snakes and turtles, too,” he recalled.

Dick Van Zandt also remembers the wildlife at the pond. “We caught bullfrogs, tadpoles, water snakes, painted turtles, even crayfish (crawdads). I think there were snapping turtles there, also, but I don't recall seeing them. Rodney Stryker (son of Parvin and Tootie Stryker) caught a six or seven pound largemouth bass, probably in the late 1960s. To my knowledge it was the largest ever caught in the pond. There were blue gills and sunfish by the hundreds, maybe thousands.”

“There were muskrats there,” Dick recalled, “and we saw them often playing on the surface of the water. Whenever we arrived at the pond to fish or swim, they would disappear, and we wouldn't see them again until the next time we visited.”

Jim Beachell also has fond memories of driving an old Opel, which his father donated for their enjoyment. “We had our own private racetrack near that pond,” he remembers.

Lake Silva at the Institute, created by damming Rock Brook, was an attraction for ice skating and hockey, but Blawenburg Beach had its own clientele in winter. “We often ice skated on the pond,” Dick recalled. “Actually, our family probably ice skated more at the pond than we did at the Institute lake. It was closer. We sometimes built large bonfires to keep us warm.”



Local kids enjoy Blawenburg Beach on a hot summer day in the summer of 1954. The pond is believed to be about 10 feet deep in the area near the raft. Not shown are the rowboat and picnic table that made the beach even more enjoyable.

The Pond Today

The pond still exists today, albeit, much smaller. It is within the development that was created after the farmland was sold in the 1990s. Dick said, “A few years ago we drove around the development but I was unable to find it. As a young boy I spent many hours/days during the summers at the pond, mostly fishing and swimming. No doubt that I remember it as being much larger than it really was and is now.”



Today, the pond is smaller and more mature than the pond of yesteryear.

The pond, is on private property and has a new dam that is in compliance with modern code. You can be sure that the modified pond took a lot more than one day to reconstruct!

The pond meant a lot to the kids who grew up near it. It was a source of fun and recreation as well as the source for many pleasant memories to look back on.

A Personal Recollection

Dick Van Zandt remembers a surprising time on Blawenburg Beach.

Slip Slidin' Away off the Blawenburg Beach

As a young boy, I spent just about every summer day possible at Blawenburg Beach, which we also called the Pond. It was just down the hill from my house, which used to be two houses east of the Elks Club. We hunted frogs and tadpoles, fished around its perimeter, and swam in it on the really hot days.

But this story is about one particular happening during a cold January day in the early 1960s. For as much time as we spent at the Pond in the summer, we

often ice skated there whenever the ice was thick enough to do so. My father (John) or grandfather (Percy) would gather up an ax or hatchet. We would all bundle up, and then together trudge down to the Pond with our ice skates tied by their laces around our necks. Upon arrival, Dad or Percy would walk carefully out onto the ice surface and chop a hole. If the ice was more than three or four inches thick, we could skate. If not, we walked dejectedly back home. Ice thickness more than a few inches was very rare!

On one particular day in January, the weather had been very cold for a week, if not longer, and a whole host of relatives, friends, and neighbors had gathered for hockey "pick-up" games and other ice activities. Up the hill we could see Percy driving down in his Pontiac sedan. This was nothing unusual since many of our neighbors and relatives often arrived at the Pond in their automobiles.

However, as he got closer, we all noticed that he was not slowing down to park! Suddenly, the car made a sharp right turn, accelerated rapidly, and slid straight out on the ice, sliding nearly to the other side of the pond before it stopped. In a flash, Percy hit the gas and the car spun around and around until it was just spinning on its own. Much to our collective surprise, the ice held and eventually he was able to navigate back to the shore amid a symphony of hoots and hollers from us all.

Needless to say, his wife, Helen, and all the gathered adults were not amused. How he missed hitting even just one of us is still a mystery to this day. With a twinkle in his eye, he never offered an explanation!! Of course, we all believed it was no accident.

Project Don Quixote



I wish I had good news to report on our quest to find the missing Van Zandt windmill, but I don't. The windmill was given to the NJ Agriculture Museum and then went missing after the museum closed.

Any information that helps us find the windmill will be greatly appreciated.

Blawenburg Fact

Van Zandt Pond was never used for irrigation, but the Van Zandts allowed the Blawenburg Fire Department to install a pipe in the pond so they could draw water in case of a big fire. This was at a time when there were no fire hydrants available along Route 518.

Looking Ahead

Blog 13. The Covenhoven Farm in East Blawenburg

Learn about the second oldest farmstead in Blawenburg and how its owners helped to develop the village.

Sources

Recollections by Jim Beachell, Dick Van Zandt, John Van Zandt, and Martha Van Zandt

Photos provided by Richard Van Zandt and David Cochran

Do you have a Tale of Blawenburg to share? Send your idea to blawenburgtales@gmail.com.