THE GRANDEUR OF WATOGA—THEN AND NOW

West Virginia’s largest state park made for an incredible childhood home for one local writer.

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Fall’s parade of colors begins emerging at Watoga Lake.
On a clear summer night in the late 1960s, I gazed up at the Milky Way galaxy at Watoga State Park. Ronnie, my older brother, asked what I wanted to be when I grew up. You’ll find out my answer soon enough.

Well before it became West Virginia’s largest state park, my family called Watoga home. My grandpa, Alfred and my grandma, Ina—Pap and Ma—married in 1910 not far from the park’s southern entrance. Pap and Ma’s 211-acre farm bordered the park at the end of a dirt road. My dad, Vernon, was the second of 14 children, born in 1912.

Dad and Pap were two of many Civilian Conservation Corps workers in the 1930s who made Watoga what it is today, building roads, bridges, cabins, a lake, and a swimming pool. The CCC was created as one of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal programs in 1933 to assist families during the Great Depression.

Just months before Watoga officially opened, Dad married Mom, and after the CCC ended he stayed on at the park as a laborer. Mom, Dad, and their five children moved to a three-bedroom, one bath CCC-built cabin next to a babbling brook. Mom was pregnant with me in 1960. I was born on Christmas.

Childhood in the Park
I lived on-site until the mid-1970s, lifeguarding at West Virginia’s first state park swimming pool, the one that Dad and Pap helped to build. And while growing up at Watoga, I was surrounded by vast wilderness and panoramic views. Perfectly wrapped Christmas gifts arrived each day for me to open, no matter the season. This is a glimpse into Watoga’s grandeur—then and now.

As a youngster, I helped raise Freckles, a fawn Dad rescued. Ronnie and I fished for native brook trout with homemade fishing poles and hooks. That fall, I wrecked my first bicycle on a steep, tree-lined country road.

When signs of spring sprouted, Ronnie and I explored rugged hillsides, drank from crystal-clear mountain streams, and ate teaberries. We eagerly ran through lush valleys, inhaling the smells of Watoga’s forest, where Native Americans had trodden before. Sometimes, we even found an arrowhead.

On sunny summer days, I learned to swim and dive for pennies at the pool. Some called the water “arctic.” I called it “refreshing.” On cooler summer nights, we sat by a campfire, roasted marshmallows, and caught fireflies in Mason jars. Every July, we honored Pap and Ma at our family reunion at the park.

When fall would arrive, Ronnie and I would ride our bikes along narrow country lanes, stopping at the T.M. Cheek Memorial Overlook for the annual fall display.
of orange, red, and yellow leaves. Winter meant snowball fights, sleigh rides, and homemade hot chocolate with the family all huddled next to the flames of a hand-laid stone fireplace.

No matter the season, Watoga’s grandeur made my childhood idyllic. Some days I was sure I lived in an enchanted forest.

Watoga Then—A Storied History
In January 1925, the State of West Virginia began purchasing land for an unnamed wildlife and timber preserve. Watoga State Park, nestled in the Allegheny Mountains of scenic Pocahontas County, officially opened on July 1, 1937. The park is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

“When you think ‘state park’, you think Watoga. It is possibly the finest example of a traditional state park in the United States. Its history is the history of our park system, and in fact, many others,” says Brad Reed, Division of Natural Resources Parks Chief. “One only needs to walk around the park to see the amazing work completed by the CCC to understand this. It blends the best of land preservation and historic CCC design and construction with facilities and amenities required by today’s traveler.”

During its development, Watoga had three CCC camps—Watoga, Seebert, and Will Rogers. “If the third camp had had its project funded, Watoga would have a 40+ acre lake instead of the Laurel Run Campground,” notes Mark Wylie, DNR district administrator and former superintendent at Watoga for 19 years. Instead, there’s 11-acre Watoga Lake, once known as Lake Killbuck.

The word “Watoga” dates back to 1906 and referenced the name of the nearby sawmill community, says Bill McNeel, historian and former editor of The Pocahontas Times. “The only source for the name ‘Watoga’ that I have found was W.A. Ross, trainmaster for the Greenbrier Division, and he selected it for the new station created for the sawmill town,” says McNeel. “How and why he came up with the name has not been found.”

Richard Dale is 95 years old and served as Watoga’s superintendent from 1966 to 1975. He is, in fact, West Virginia’s oldest living former state park superintendent. He says that Watoga is a Native American name and is a variant of Watauga, which means “river of islands.” Some people also say that Watoga is a Cherokee word that means “starry waters.”
Watoga Now—Its Grandeur Continues to Enthrall

Even today, Watoga mesmerizes visitors with its precious gems and treasures waiting to be discovered. The recent discovery of synchronous fireflies has park and DNR officials planning for a substantial increase in visitors. Watoga joins an exclusive list of four locations in the U.S. that allow the viewing of the show-stopping performance of these unique species in public areas.

“With a dramatic increase in visitors, some may see this as a problem,” says Jody Spencer, Watoga’s current superintendent. “However, we see this as a fantastic opportunity for visitors and the continued success of the park.”

Moreover, Watoga’s application, along with one other state park and one state forest, to the International Dark Sky Association for a Dark Sky State Park designation is pending. If approved, educational programs and star parties will be incorporated into the park’s activities schedule.

A Modern Park for the Ages

From swimming to fishing to hiking and sightseeing, there’s something for everyone at Watoga. You can enjoy tennis, laser tag, cornhole, geocaching, horseshoes, disc golf, basketball, or volleyball, and so much more. You can hike on the park’s 40 miles of well-maintained trails. Or cast your line from the banks of Watoga Lake or from a boat, and you might get a nibble by bass, bluegill, catfish, or trout. Enjoy stunning vistas at Ann Bailey Lookout Tower and T.M. Cheek Memorial Overlook, where you can see for miles. Or become immersed in the flora and fauna at Brooks Memorial Arboretum.

Step back in time and stay at a CCC cabin constructed with pine and chestnut logs. The CCC workers used native stone to build foundations, chimneys, and fireplaces. Or opt for a more rugged experience by roughing it at the primitive Laurel Run Campground. Beaver Creek and Riverside campgrounds offer electric hookups, bathhouses, and laundry facilities.

The swimming pool is heated by solar panels. Wi-Fi is available at select locations throughout the park. And other modern updates include the modernization of kitchens and baths in all cabins.

Built in the late 1800s, the historic Workman Cabin, located off of Jesse’s Cove Trail, is undergoing extensive preservation and restorative efforts by volunteers with the Watoga State Park Foundation.

Preserving Watoga’s Grandeur Forever

While visiting my dear friend Watoga recently, I looked up to admire the Milky Way once again, like Ronnie and I had done 50 years earlier. Those night skies still dazzle me.

The answer to my brother’s question when we were stargazing as children is that I wanted to be a writer when I grew up. So, these days, I extoll Watoga’s grandeur—then and now—by writing for the Watoga State Park Foundation. The foundation is a nonprofit organization that promotes the recreation, conservation, ecology, history, and natural resources of the park.

Dad and Pap would want the preservation of Watoga’s history and grandeur to continue forever. That’s my mission. After each wondrous visit to Watoga, I dread leaving. But through the rustling leaves of Watoga’s winds, I hear her beckoning my return. I whisper back: “Watoga, my dear friend, I will see you soon.”