

Swimming holes irresistible—and deadly

This article was researched by Staff Writers John O'Neil, Sari Koshetz and Vic Ziminsky and written by John O'Neil

The problem stands out clearly on a map of the county: A thick line of blue cuts across the north of Westchester — Croton Reservoir, Amawalk, Cross River and Titicus — and dots and ovals of lakes, ponds and quarries lie scattered across the landscape.

In these and many other bodies of water too small to win notice on the map, children, teen-agers and adults swim each summer. And each summer, some drown.

There have been at least six drownings in northern Westchester this summer. Two teen-agers died in an abandoned quarry in Cortlandt which is said to have claimed 29 lives since World War II. A 20-year old Mount Vernon man drowned in the placid night waters of a North Castle pond known as the "Mud-hole."

A 12-year-old from New York City drowned last week in a well-supervised county park. And two fishermen have drowned in reservoirs in North Salem this summer while attempting to retrieve fishing lures.

The first three victims listed were all swimming illegally, but police and town officials around the county say little could have been done to prevent such tragedies.

Mount Pleasant Police Chief Paul Oliva says there are 22 bodies of water in his town, most of which are privately owned, and "at any given time during the summer, there might be someone swimming at one of them."

It would be impossible for his department to patrol all the swimming spots in town, he says.

Natalie Nordheim, the recreation superintendent of Pound Ridge, echoes Oliva's view: "I am sure that there're as many swimming holes as there are ponds."

New Castle Police Chief Frank Comito says his department does not regularly patrol the many ponds in town, but is always ready to respond to complaints from property owners.

"We don't have occasion to make many arrests, thank God," he says. The last drowning he can recall occurred about 15 years ago, in a swimming pool.

There are exceptions to this laissez-faire policy. The extensive holdings of the New York City Water Department all are posted and patrolled occasionally by boat.



STAFF PHOTO BY MICHAEL DECHILLO

29 lives have reportedly been lost in this Cortlandt quarry since WWII

The one swimming hole New Castle police have been making a concerted effort to keep clear, Comito says, is a pond off Frog Rock Road which is part of the New York City water supply system.

Both the North Castle and the Bedford police make periodic attempts to shut down certain swimming holes, but admit they can have only limited success.

Last Saturday night, Bedford police collared 16 swimmers at the Colonial Sand Pit near Route 22, which resulted in \$25 fines for 15 of the youths.

Police Chief Knut Johannessen says: "We try to keep them away from these places, but it's often impossible. Most of the time we don't have the manpower" to make group arrests.

North Castle police had arrested 22 persons at the Kensico Reservoir only one day before a 20-year-old man from Mount Vernon drowned in the "Mud-hole," a pond on Byram Lake Road.

Sgt. William McClure, a member of the North Castle police Underwater Rescue Squad, said at the time: "They want to know why we aren't catching burglars instead of hassling them. Then they sit with tears in their eyes when a friend drowns."

In Cortlandt, the danger posed by the abandoned quarry had been known for years, but attempts to keep swimmers

away have been frustrated by "a shortage of state police manpower and because of a change of ownership," says Cortlandt Patrolman Robert Pavone.

Police cannot make arrests on private property unless it is posted with "No Trespassing" signs, or if the owner has given specific permission.

In the wake of this summer's two deaths at the quarry, Cortlandt Supervisor Charles DiGiacomo met with the owners of the site, Quarry Acres Inc. of New York, and arranged for them to pay for weekend patrols by county police for the rest of the summer.

The number of swimmers at the quarry has fallen dramatically because "the word is out" that arrests will be made, Pavone says.

Also complicating the problem of shutting down such a swimming hole is the large number of youths it attracts from down-county and New York City. The site has become known far and wide, Pavone says, because "its seclusion gives them a freer hand at drinking beer. There aren't any neighbors to complain."

Many police officials link drugs and alcohol to drownings, and the carpet of broken glass at Cortlandt's granite quarry would attest to the claim.

But Trooper McCabe of the state police Underwater Rescue team disagrees. "There's not much of a pattern," he says, "but most of it's inexperience."

Cluster zoning hearing slated

The public hearing on a proposed amendment to the Irvington cluster zoning ordinance, which would permit a developer to shift the housing density from one portion of the property to another, will be continued at 8 p.m. at Monday's Board of Trustees' meeting.

The hearing, which began at the July meeting, given residents an opportunity to comment on how the village has translated the philosophy of the master plan land use study into local law. The land use study, prepared by a Philadelphia firm, is being used as a guideline in the development of Irvington's 600 acres of vacant land, much of it formerly of large estates.

Under the amendment, the developer who offers the village a portion of his property for use as open space, or whose property contains large blocks of "environmentally sensitive areas," would not be penalized. He would maintain the total density, but that density would be concentrated in certain areas of the land.

The trustees will also hold a public hearing on a change of the dog ordinance to conform with that of the town of Greenburgh.

1980 Jul Multiple fatals at quarries

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