

**SADDLE BROOK FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY – SADDLE BROOK HISTOICAL SOCIETY –
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Splash! I had been walking on the macadam path that encircles our lake at Saddle Brook Park – Otto Pehle Section. I knew it was the sound of an animal diving into the water as I approached its “safety zone.” Splash has become the inaccurate, generic term for any person or thing being thrown into, falling into or otherwise entering water. My friends and I who grew up in the 1940’s and early 1950’s used the area surrounding the river as our playground. In those days the lake was actually a marsh, the last remnant of the melting glacier and resulting glacial lake which it left behind some 15,000 years ago. Until 1956, it was common for youngsters to bring punks, also called cattails, home from the marsh. Once lit afire, they gave off a smokey aroma that warded off the multitude of pesky mosquitoes that accompanied those warm summer nights.

The area was abundant with wildlife including raccoons, skunks, snakes, possums, snapping turtles and beavers. We swam and fished in the river amidst Lenne-Lenape pottery shards, arrowheads and other Native American artifacts. Those were wonderful days, careless and free from adult supervision.

In 1956, the marsh was plowed out, and again it became a lake. The earth around the lake was raised about ten feet and the macadam walkway was laid down. It was accompanied by a playing field, a parking lot and a building for restrooms. Steve’s Gulf Service Station was converted into the utility building that is now to the immediate right as one enters the park from Saddle River Road. The county provided a boathouse which is still situated on the northwest shore of the lake and rowboats which could be rented by the hour. It was a wonderful attraction which lasted for a year. Unfortunately, some teenagers abused the privilege by far overstaying their allotted hour. They departed the boat at the south end of the lake where the boat keeper could not catch them. Some also piloted the boats like ancient galleons ramming each other during imaginary battles! The Phoenicians would have been proud of them. The county officials weren’t.

Oh, getting back to the “splash.” It was either a turtle jumping off a log or some other animal entering the water. I looked over the shore to see if there were any logs or even dead tree limbs extending into the water. There weren’t, and I knew that the sounds had probably come from a furry little critter called a muskrat. Muskrats were abundant in the marsh when I was a child, and I’ve occasionally seen them over the years basking or feeding beneath the lakes overhanging banks.

Amazingly, the muskrats have survived. They had been trapped into the 1950’s for their thick, lustrous furs. Even though they are distantly related to mice and rats, being aquatic, they are

clean little animals. Some early townspeople would sell their pelts and keep the animal's cleaned carcass for the dinner table. They were about a third the size of a beaver and, according to one "old timer," provided about two pounds of good-tasting meat. In those days nothing was wasted; and as noted in our township history, *Saddle Brook: A Portrait of Our Past*, Alberta Burns, who was born in 1911, reported that her "brother, Leslie, used to trap muskrats on the Saddle River and sell their skins. Mother used to cook the carcasses and mixed with meal, made a good dinner for the cats and dogs."



Of course, those days are gone; but I still enjoy walking through the park to see a heron waiting motionless the water for an unsuspecting fish, a woodchuck or, surprisingly, a small vole emerging from its tunnel – homestead in search of insects. How rewarding!

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