

# Halcyon Days, Trout Fishing at Lake's Edge:

By Donald Mackey as told to Francesca Lyman

*The sky was blue over the lake, with a nice ripple, that Sunday afternoon last winter. Donald Mackey and his wife, Dianne, were enjoying the rare sunny day, walking along the slope of the hill, past the railroad ties. Near the bridge over the mouth of Denny Creek, he lingered by the water's edge, taking in the woodsy scent of the stream where he had so often fished for trout as a kid. When his parents and grandparents went visiting on Finn Hill, they would drop him off there to fish.*

*The old bunkhouse that once stood up the hill from the shore had disappeared years before. But it seemed like not so long ago that every yard of beach was staked out with daylong picnic encampments, gatherings of his family, and other families and friends, many from Big Finn Hill, and others from Little Finn Hill, further south toward Juanita.*

*None of the old beach tables were occupied now, but in his memory he recalled from his childhood the stretches of grass packed with people. The park was coming back to life in his mind. He shares this reminiscence with all of us.*

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It was always O.O. Denny Park. But the north end, we called Camp Denny, alongside an old fence that was there for years. That was originally where the City of Seattle bused their kids to stay a week or two at a time in the old bunkhouse. My memories really started in 1941. However I am sure that I was there many times before, having been



born in 1938 in Kirkland Hospital to parents of Finnish descent.

It was a time during the summers when the first men to arrive at the park shelter

in the morning got the fire going in the shelter stove. The stove was about 14 feet high, with a large chimney in the center, dividing it in half. The top was heavy, made of iron plates, and the firebox was concrete with heavy iron doors in the ends for loading wood.

The ladies put on pots of kahvi (coffee) in the morning. Later they would start midday lunch, and then dinner. We seemed to have something to eat all day long. Weekends

with good weather, the park was full, and I remember having to get there early to stake out our own table for the day. We ate stews and casseroles, with potatoes (mainly boiled), meat balls, chicken, some noodles, and salads, of course (my favorite being potato salad). My dad liked a rich chowder called Kalamojakka (made of chunks of salmon, with all-spice, rutabaga and dill). Hamburgers and hot dogs made an appearance around the mid-50's. It wasn't a potluck all of the time so each family had to take turns for a spot on the stove.

Weekdays, in the evenings, you could get a table any time and we brought an old Coleman gas stove to warm up dinners prepared at home. If we didn't get a picnic table, we would spread our blankets on the grass. Mind you, this park had people from all over the North End and Eastside, of all nationalities. However, the Finnish families did have a large group in the surrounding areas, not only Finn Hill!



Deer were around and the occasional bear would be spotted. Coyotes were all over the back country and did a lot of howling at night. All the same smaller animals were around, as now, except that there were more of them.

We would like to spend hot summer afternoons during the week after work, for a swim and dinner. I remember the camp next door, on the North side of the fence where the city of Seattle's youth programs were set up. Occasionally my friends and I would go over by the fence and ask how things were in town. It did seem like a long way away at the time from the North end, or the Eastside.

I learned how to swim at O.O. Denny Park, and I was pretty good by seven or eight years old. I really loved to explore the bottom of the lake, although I didn't use a face mask till years later and I didn't ever have a snorkel. I would dive to maybe 12 to 15 feet, most of the time, at the deepest cut, and was able to stay down quite awhile.

This was a precursor to my fishing the area. I learned where the drop-offs came near the shoreline and where the perch liked to hang out in Lake Washington. North of the creek mouth, it swooped toward the bulk head like a small underwater bay, and it started 5 feet from the bulk-head and went out to 8 to 10 feet within 20 feet and as far as I knew it went on down to 20 feet, and over, after that.

# A Secret History of O.O Denny Park

It was the trout hole. The perch liked to hang out by the North fence that divided the park, where there was shallower water with some underwater weeds that grew there.

At that time I also spent hours in Denny Creek and noticed small trout and salmon. Plus, I would catch insects of all types and feed them to the fish and watch them come out from the under-cut banks and take the offerings.

One warm fall day in the 1940s, we were on the last



picnic of the year and I went to the creek and spotted a couple large fish in the creek behind the caretaker's house

so I went and showed my dad. "Well," he said, "they're salmon and probably Silvers (Coho)."

As I got a little older — most likely 11 or 12 years — I started to apply the experience of fishing for trout with my dad in many lakes and streams around Washington to the Denny Park lakeshore. From reading *Field & Stream* and *Outdoor Life*, it dawned on me that there were most likely trout lying at the mouth of the creek in the fall and spring that were going to either spawn or eat the fry as they came out of the creek — and I was right. My younger brother and I would take a few cutthroat (some of which were sea-run) and rainbow trout. Then we started fishing through the winter and making a ritual of going over on Christmas Day to try out the new fishing gear that we inevitably would get as presents (if the roads were drivable).

During this time, I started a very primitive style of fly-fishing. I had noticed in the late summer, in the evenings, that a red flying ant came out of the rotted logs in the bulkhead and woods and fish were rising consistently beyond my reach so I got an old inner-tube, tied in a canvas seat and was given an old beat up bamboo fly rod and an old Bronson fly reel with a 100 feet of level fly line.

With a little tape and good luck, I was able to throw (not cast, mind you) at least twice the length of the rod. I caught some nice rainbow and however many squawfish

(now known as the Northern Pike Minnow). The real ant hooked on would work well but then I got some advice from a sport shop and bought an imitation ant so I didn't have to bother catching those ants anymore.

The caretaker of Denny Park was an older fellow who also enjoyed fishing after work and watched my progression as a fisherman. He kept an old wooden row boat chained to the bridge at the mouth of the creek. He saw I'd gotten a driver's license and was able to get there with my 40' Ford coupe hot rod. I suppose he figured I was responsible enough (little did he know) so he gave me a key to the boat and I would get the oars out of his woodshed and use the boat for a few years until the time he moved on and his cabin was torn down.

The real trick he had shown me was the use of a Flat-Fish F-4 orange with black spots and a ¼ to ½ ounce weight that really caught some nice trout trolled slow. However, I did use flies in the evenings, which also worked well, mainly slowly mooching them.

Ecologists now say the water is as clean or cleaner as it was in my days of exploring thanks to the sewers Metro placed years ago. The engineering started in about 1959 and construction began in 1960 or '61, so it did not take long for the lake to clean up. In the early 60's, I was raising my own family. We did some swimming and picnicking. But since the pollution warnings were out about the water, we went to cleaner lakes.

Those early years eventually led to a misspent life of "only fly-fishing" for trout and steelhead, summer or winter. So ends the memories of my secret fishing spot on Lake Washington.

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*Mackey, who grew up in Bothell and Lake City, has spent much of his life working as a contractor in the electrical power line, telephone and cable TV fields, working most recently as an estimator and division manager for Evergreen Utility Contractors. He and his wife, Diane, married after graduating from Roosevelt High school, and they now live in Wandering Creek, a waterfront development in Bothell. Their current home is situated about a quarter-mile from the house his parents brought him to after he was born, so you could say he swam back to his spawning grounds.*

